DREAMOIRE

MYTHS & LEGENDS

Dear readers and observers of the arts,

Thank you so much for giving this project a chance. What you're about to experience is the wonderous world of the Dream SMP, as told through myths, folk tales and legends. One thing you should bear in mind as you leaf through these pages, is that the truth--every fraction of it--lies in the eye of the beholder. There is someone out there who knew these stories to be true. It is up to you to decide whether you believe their words, or whether you peek between the lines and uncover what lies hidden. It may be a treacherous journey with bounty unbeheld, just as well as it might be a trap. Some stories are merely that, after all. Stories. Be as it may, I wholly hope you are prepared to witness the yet untold.

I wish you all the luck, stranger. And may our paths cross again.

-Feminetomboy, organiser

Each character has one song that relates to them and their tale within this project, organised in the same order you see them within these pages.

This playlist was compiled by the contributors for each character!

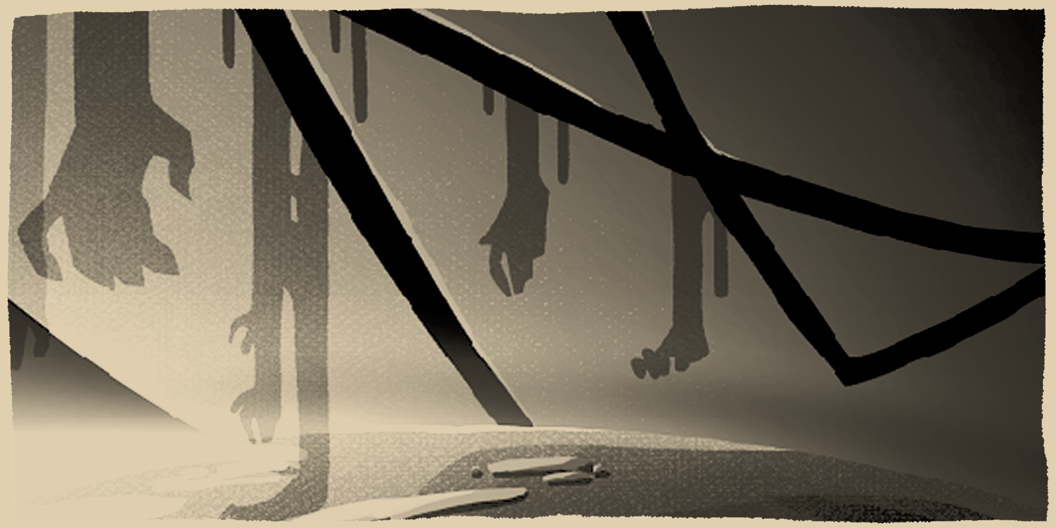
Dreamoire

A Dream SMP Folklore Anthology

Cover illustration by Zannolin

24

It's Called Interstellar Entropy



written by Hellen

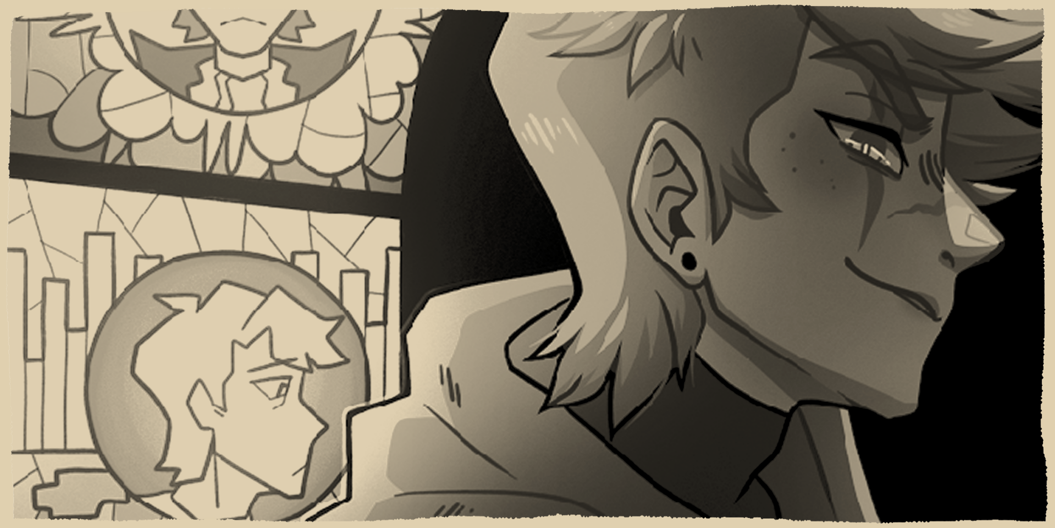
@Hellenite1 @Hellenite

illustrated by thunderbottle

@thunderbottle

38

Hunting for a power called blasphemy



written by Malaki

@voidish_ @phantoids

illustrated by IOWNFISH

@iownedfish @iownfish @iown_fish

58

The Night the Sun Was Still

written by Yumgrapejuice

@yumgrapesjuice @YumGrapeJuice

illustrated by Jin

@out_for_lunch_ @wwwj1ncom

78

Five Steps to Stoke a Fire

written by ardett

@ardett_ @ardett

illustrated by suevann

@suevann77 @evrrsage

94

Vessels & Prisons

written by penink

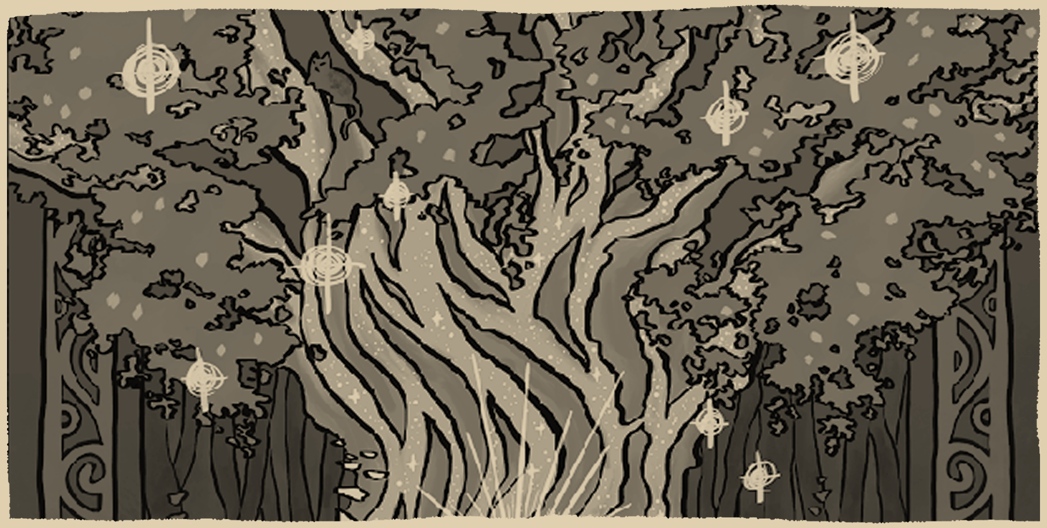
@peninkwrites @penink

illustrated by Jae

@99percentjae

104

The Doctor and the Lemon Tree



written by Dee Hoorayy

@hoorayy @coleopterad

illustrated by Callie

@sootandsalad

116

Growing Season

written by Dee Hoorayy

@hoorayy @coleopterad

illustrated by Inktea

@ER0_RS @Lnktea

124

Born of Life

written by Clings

@clingyduoapologist @clingingtocreativity

illustrated by Dead_egg

@2dead_egg

142

Stupid Idiot Death Knife.

written by A.D.

@anonymous-dentist

illustrated by Miauta

@Miauta_Mi

156

The Boy and his Ghosts

written by zrenia

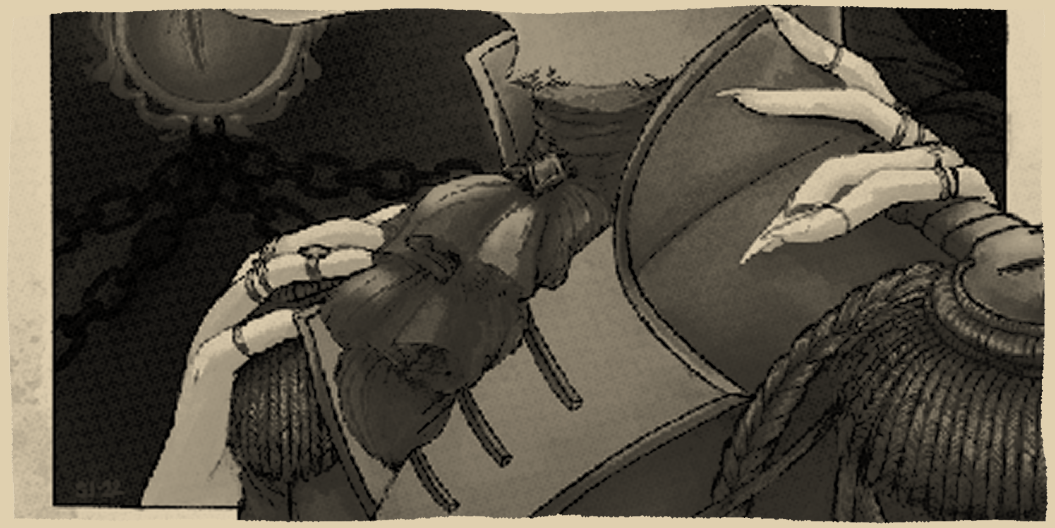
@zrenia

illustrated by panidanya

@panidanya

164

The fox who traveled to the end of the world



written by Yen Yinlin

@honeyblockm @cryptofhoney

illustrated by crow

@crowcrowscrows

172

alien blues

written by Icarus

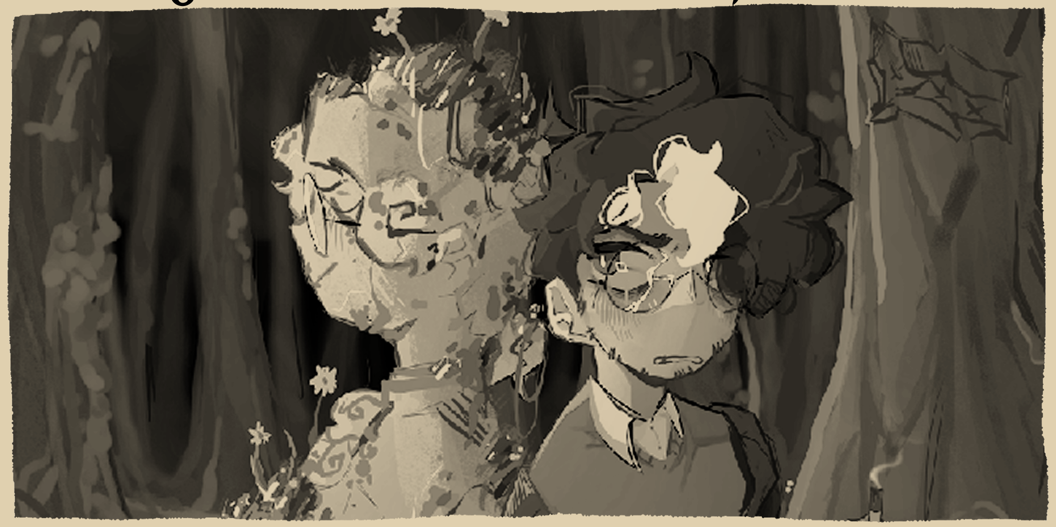
@starsyzygy_ @apollos-boyfriend @soldierpoetprince

illustrated by hana

@meijeri_ @meijeri

184

A History Revision Journal: Improper Legend, Self Reflections, and Farewells



written by cupsmp

@cupsmp @cupqueencake

illustrated by fyn

@fynori

196

The Tale of Schlatt

written by Vanyel

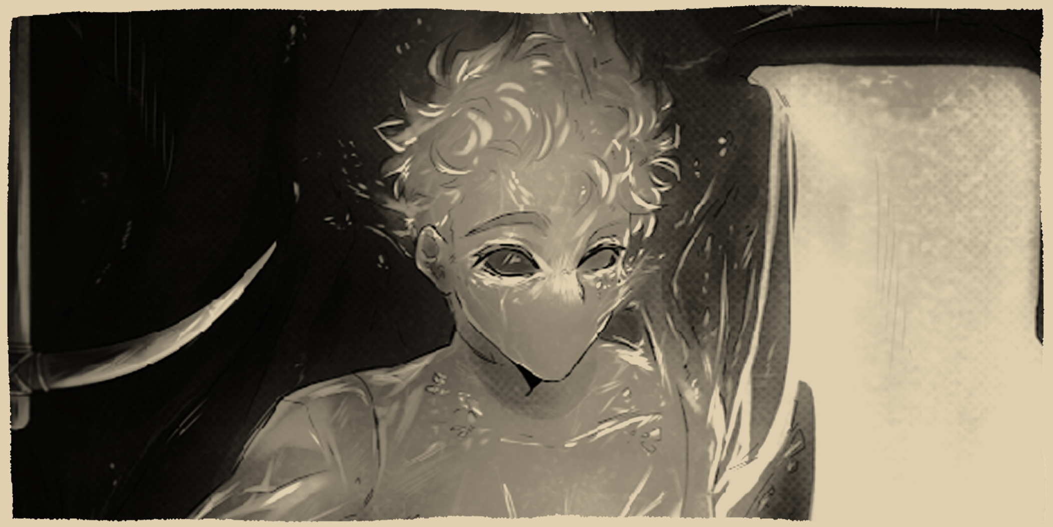
@boonbeenblade

illustrated by feminetomboy

@feminetomboy

214

The Diamond Statue



written by Odaigahara

@droidofmay @Odaigahara

illustrated by LeraGoesSouth

@LeraGoesSouth

228

Immortal Betrayer, So They Cry

written by Miki

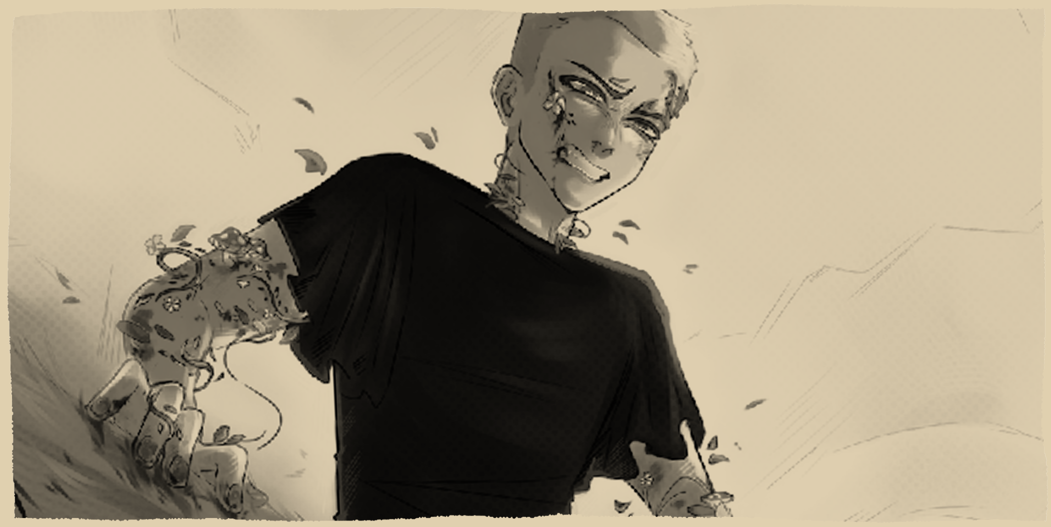
@dsmpwritingdump @its me miki

illustrated by Melamoryblack

@smudlesmel

236

The Man Who Fell Into Hell



written by Cinder

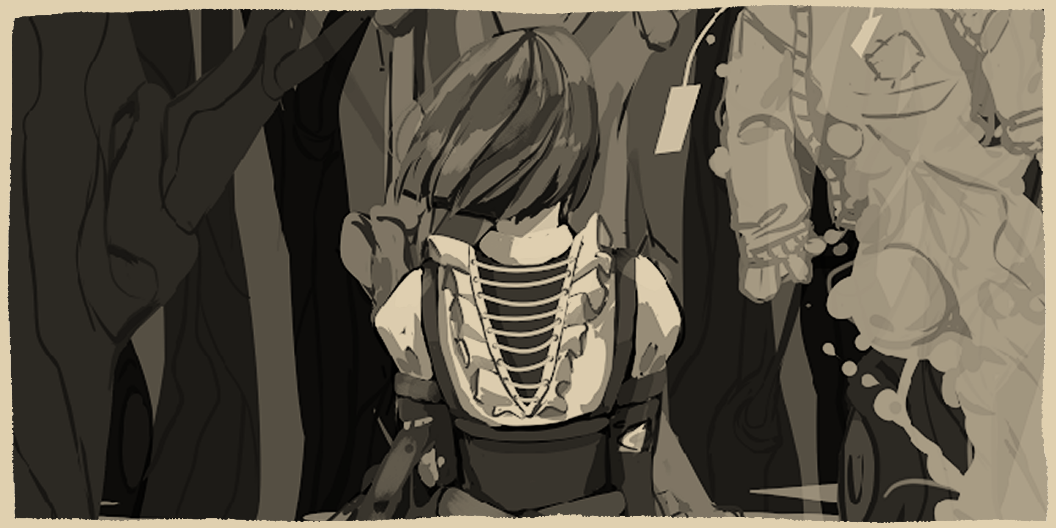
@awkwardthings6

illustrated by LeraGoesSouth

@LeraGoesSouth

250

Revenge and What it Does to You



written by Cat

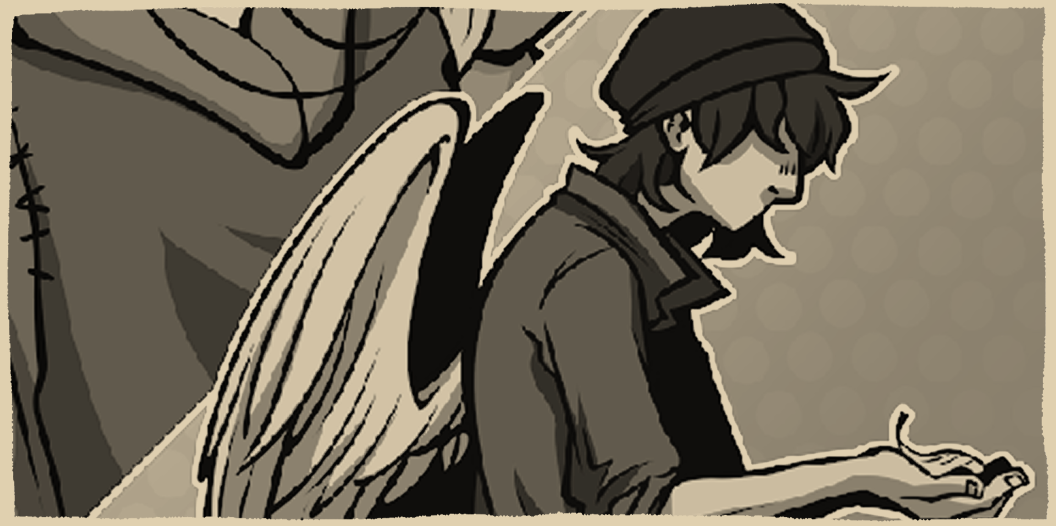
@the-multiverse-theory @TheMultiverseTheory

illustrated by BehrJBehr

@behrjbehr

260

Lucky Duck



written by Jacen

@jacenbren

illustrated by Miauta

@Miauta_Mi

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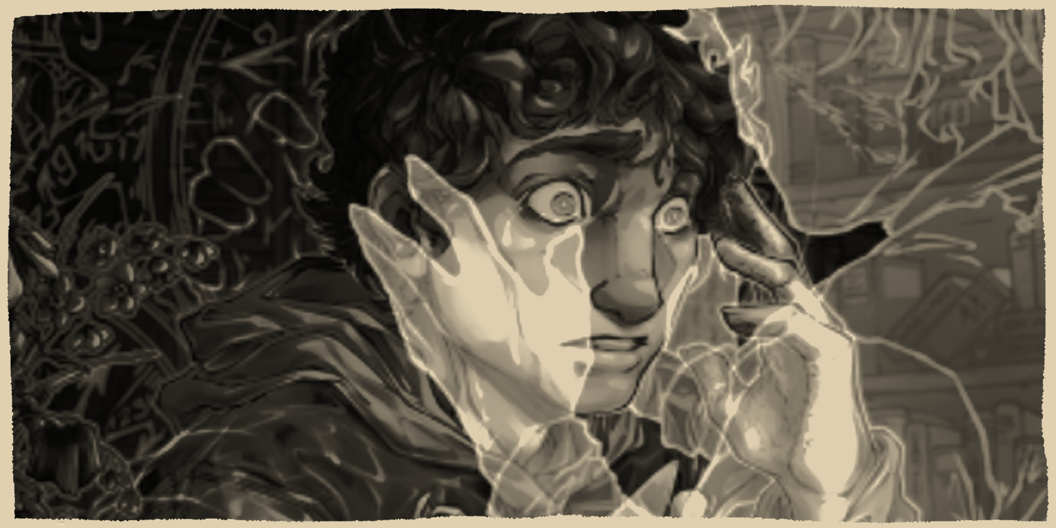
Slowly Forgetting, A Silent Dreamer



written by Miki

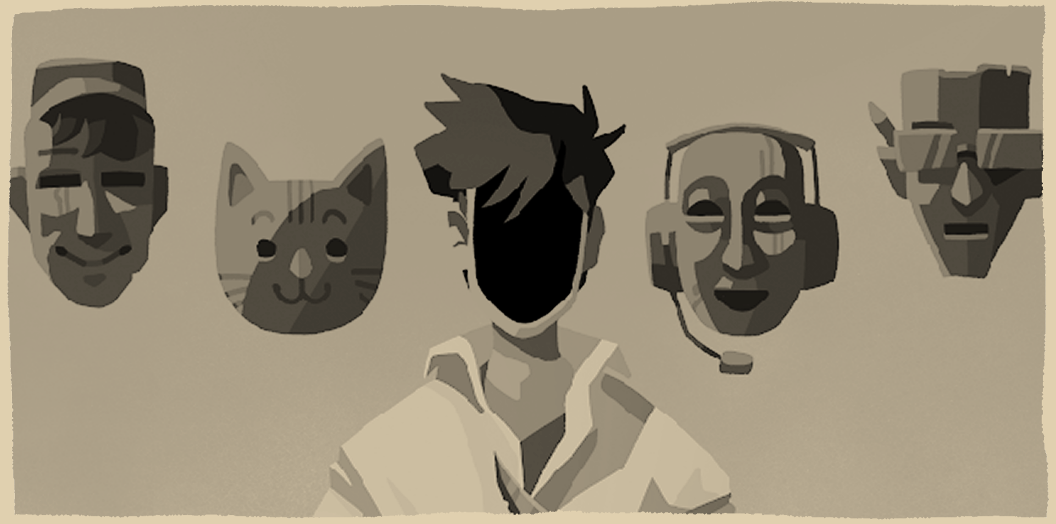
@dsmpwritingdump @its me miki

illustrated by Archfey

@ArchfeyArts @archfey-edda

286

Masking Price



written by Vanyel

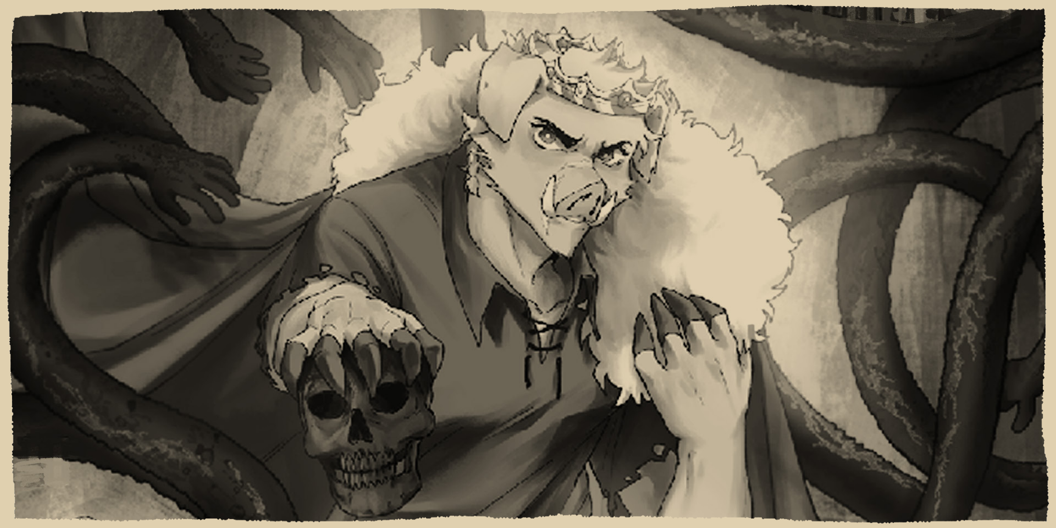
@boonbeenblade

illustrated by thunderbottle

@thunderbottle

300

The Quests of the Blood God



written by Teahound

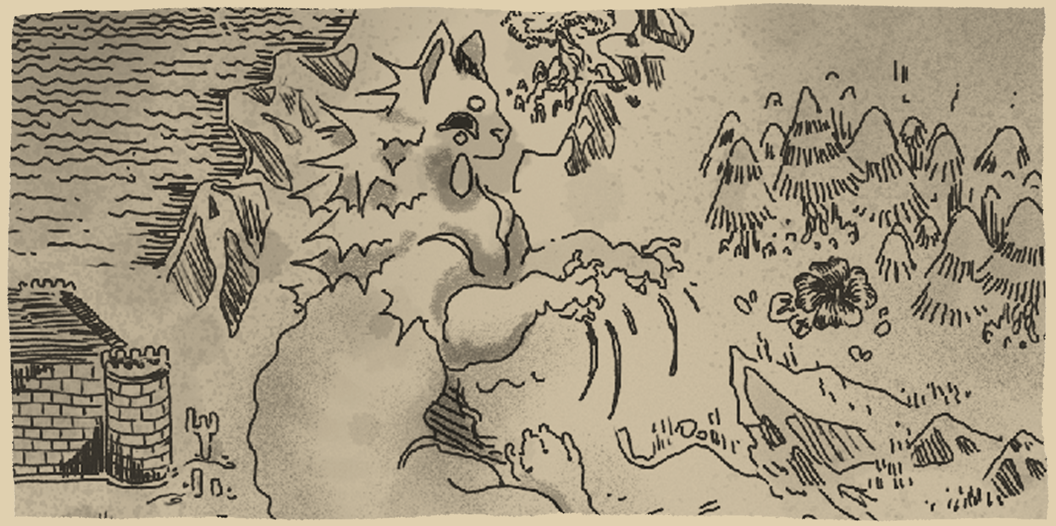
@tea-with-veth @Teahound

illustrated by NHM

@art0fdraw_NHM @thvarkxhmn

312

Voluntary Exile



written by mellointheory

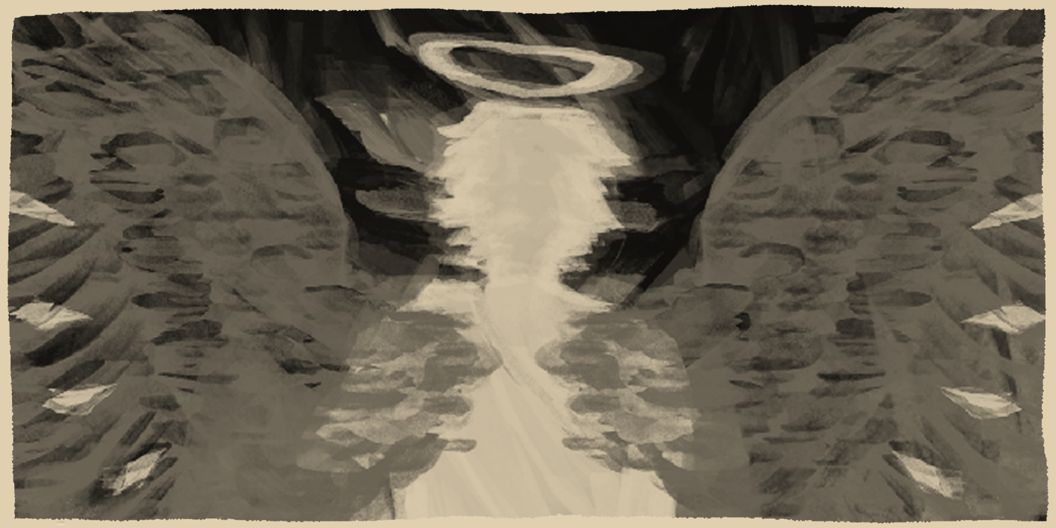
@mellointheory

illustrated by Maws

@Mrraws_

320

Of those that refuse to pay the ferryman



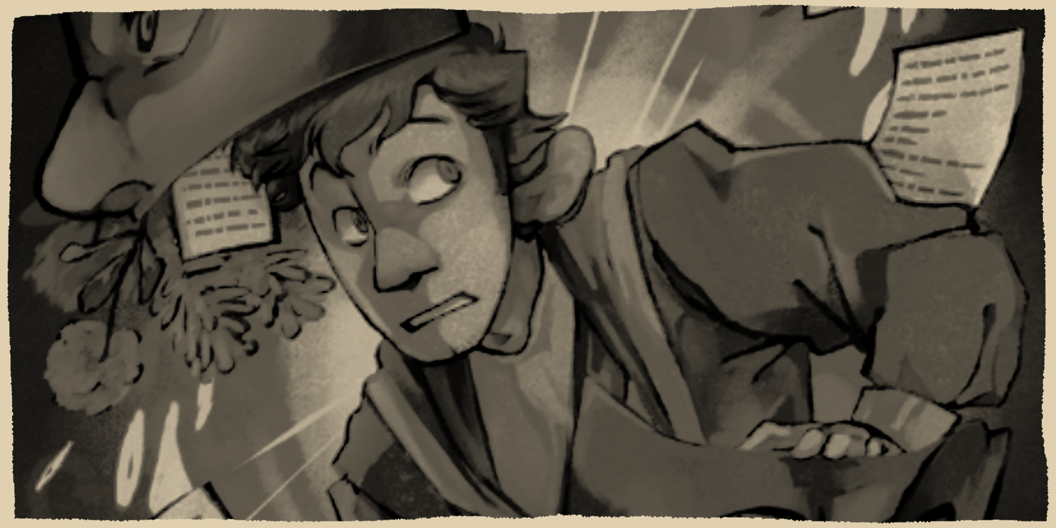
written by Areus

@areus-in-a-little-cave @auvrenareus @AreusWritesFanfic

illustrated by freogo

@freogo

340
A Man Lost Through Time



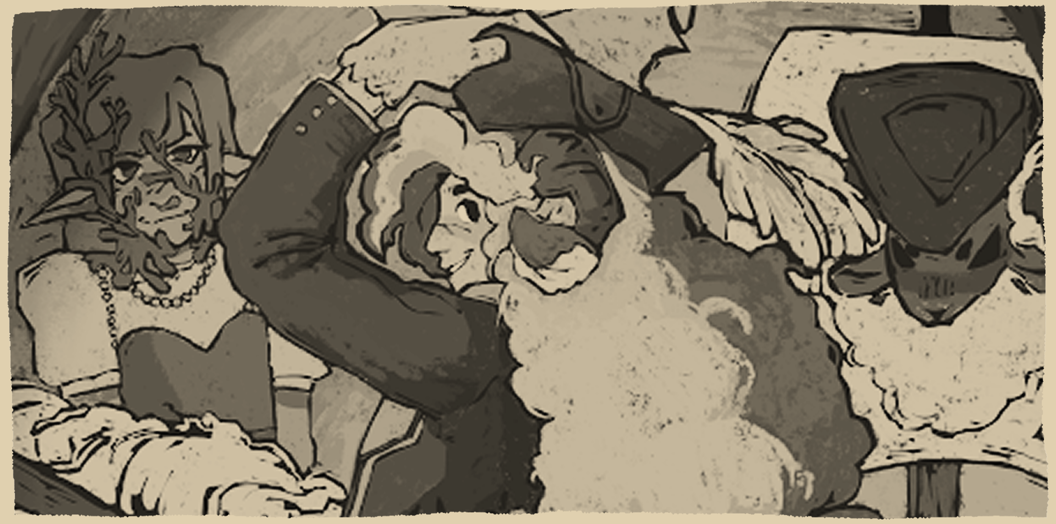
written by penink

@peninkwrites @penink

illustrated by Richie

@ARCADEFLOOR @racetrackroach

360
The Pirate Queen



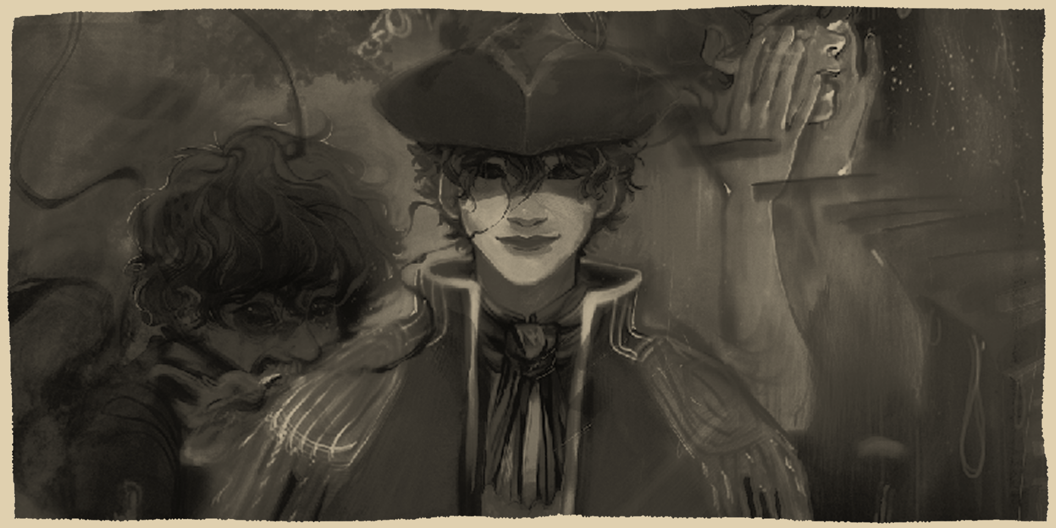
written by Hellen

@Hellenite1 @Hellenite

illustrated by hex

@Hex_fish

370
The President in the Mirror & Other Ghost Stories



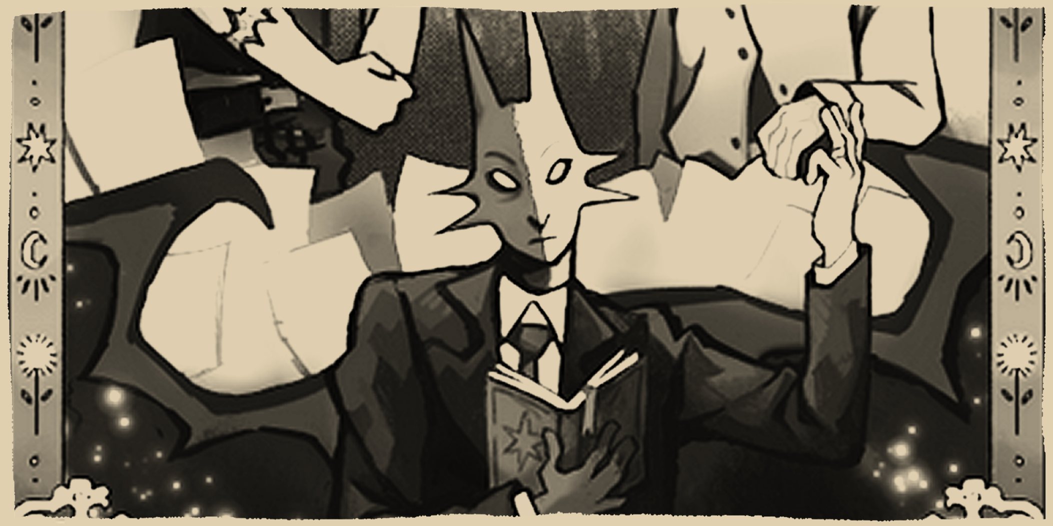
written by Zannolin

@zannolin

illustrated by n0bluev

@n0bluev

382
A Dragon, A Ghost, A Golden Goat



written by renardroi

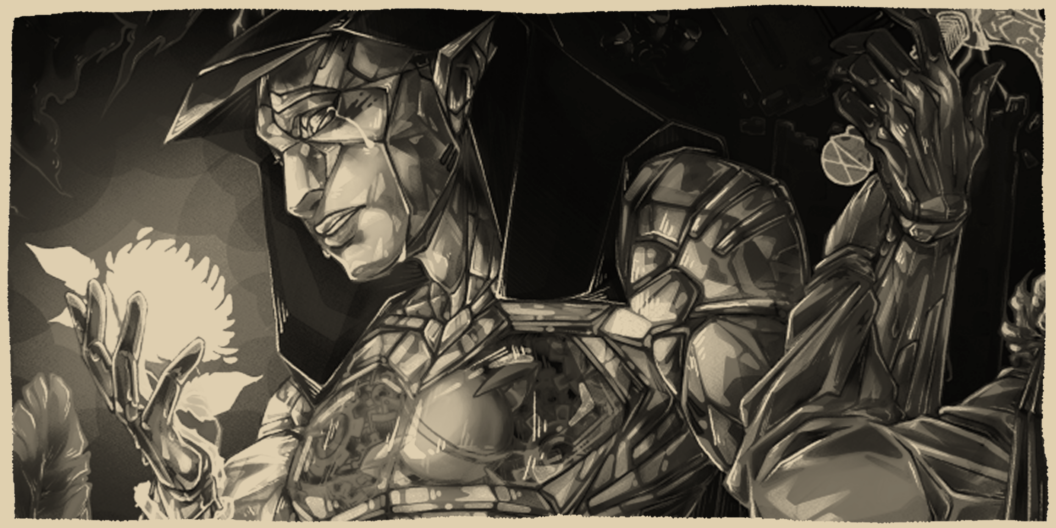
@renardroi

illustrated by eekonis

@eekonis

396

Totem of Death, Forever Undying



written by Jacen

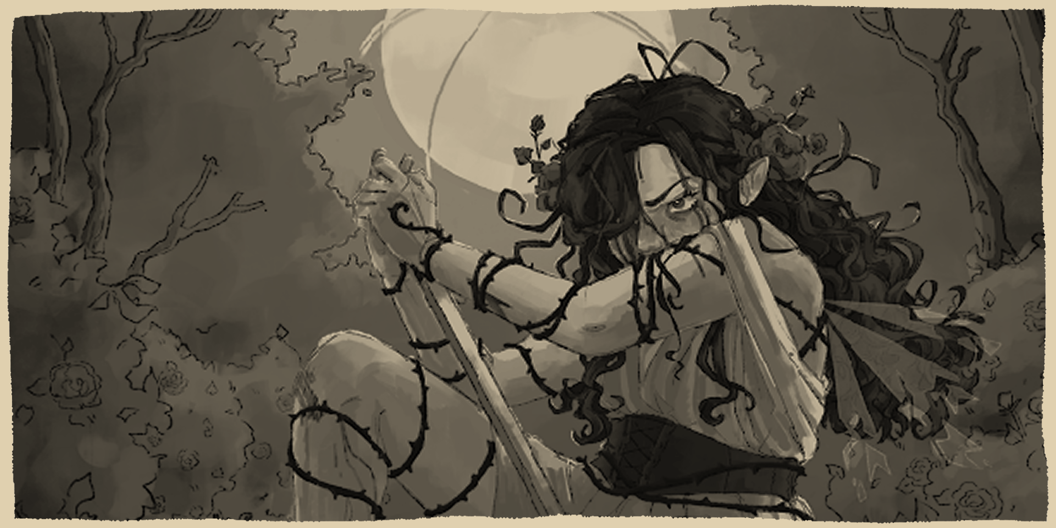
@jacenbren

illustrated by Archfey

@ArchfeyArts @archfey-edda

406

The Rot and the Rose



written by thcscus

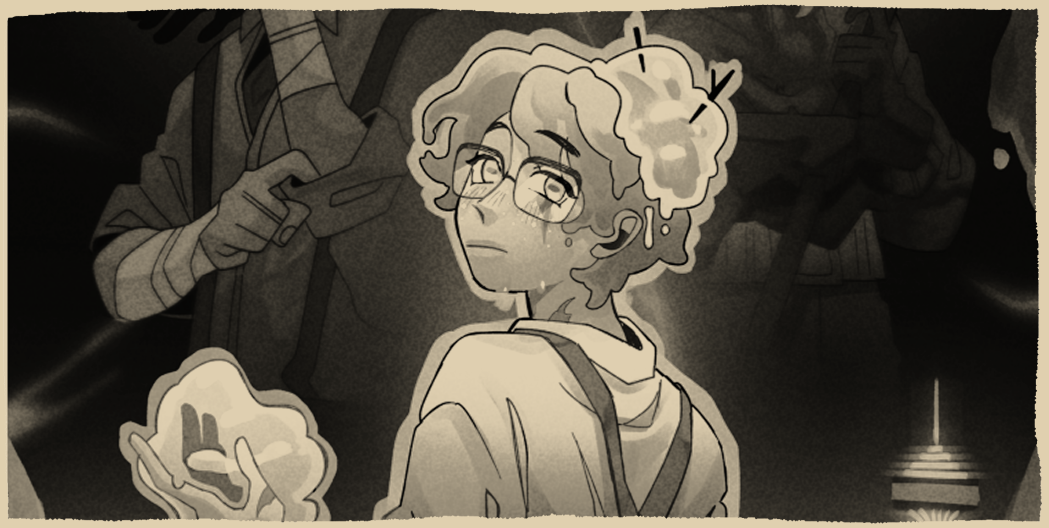
@thcscus

illustrated by Gynii

@gyniizilla @gynii

418

From One Echo to Another



written by Lyre

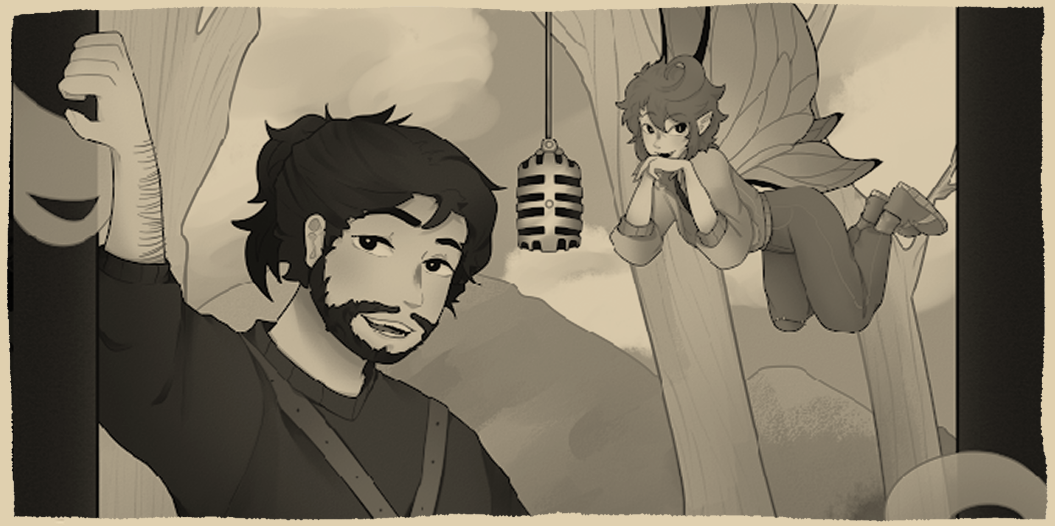
@slyrebird @slyreb1rd

illustrated by Jae

@99percentjae

428

Find Serenity



written by Icarus

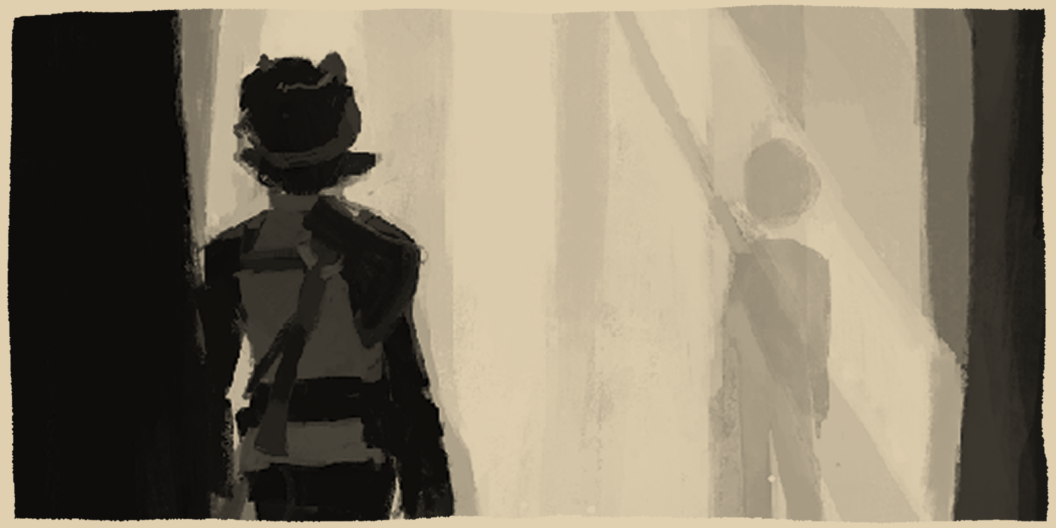
@starsyzygy_ @apollos-boyfriend @soldierpoetprince

illustrated by Inktea

@ER0_RS @Lnktea

434

Learning to Swim While on Fire



written by cupsmp

@cupsmp @cupqueencake

illustrated by Dead_egg

@2dead_egg

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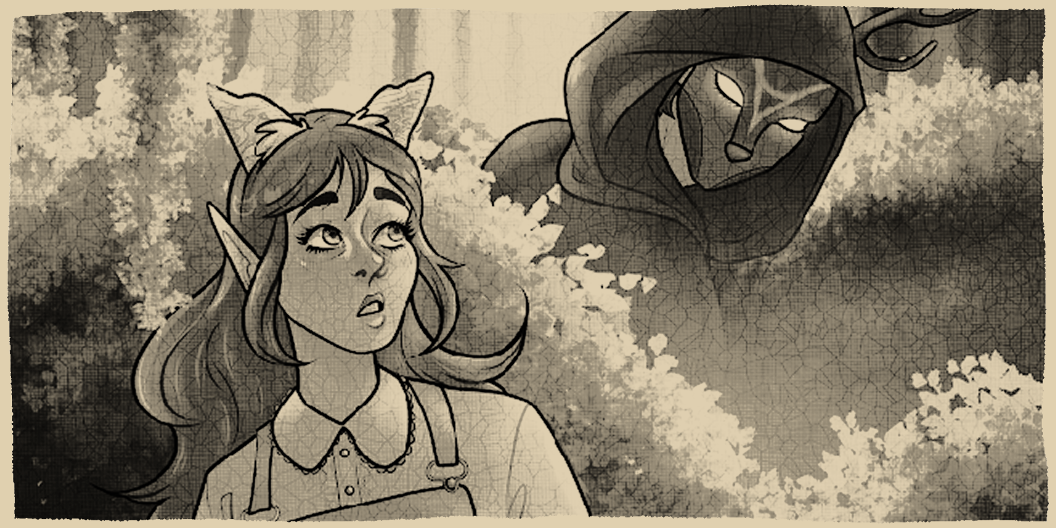
Of Demigods, Demons, and Cats



written by soap

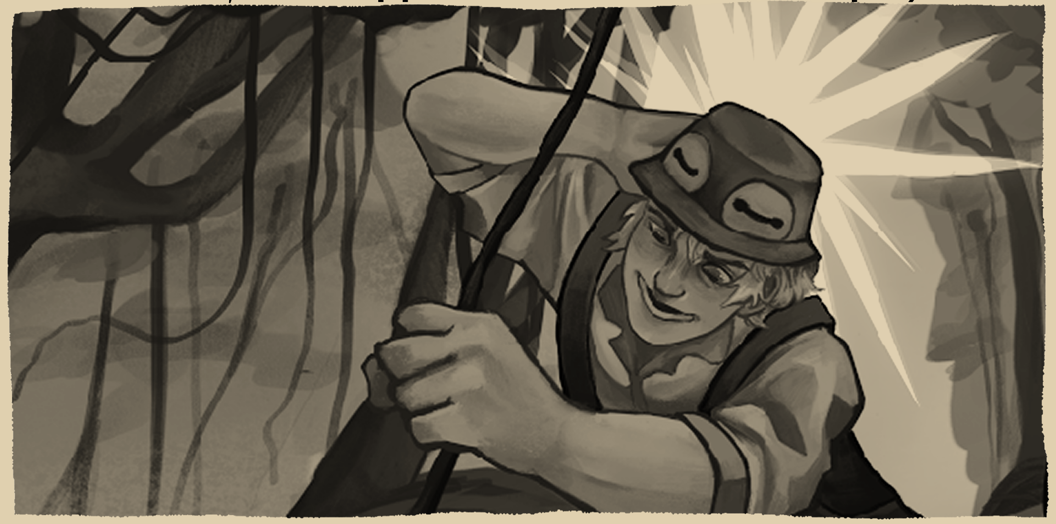
@lepidopteragirl @june_showers

illustrated by Tiffycat

@tiiffycat @Tiffycat

458

An Encounter in a Swamp; or How BoomerNA Happened to Gain an Employer



written by Odaigahara

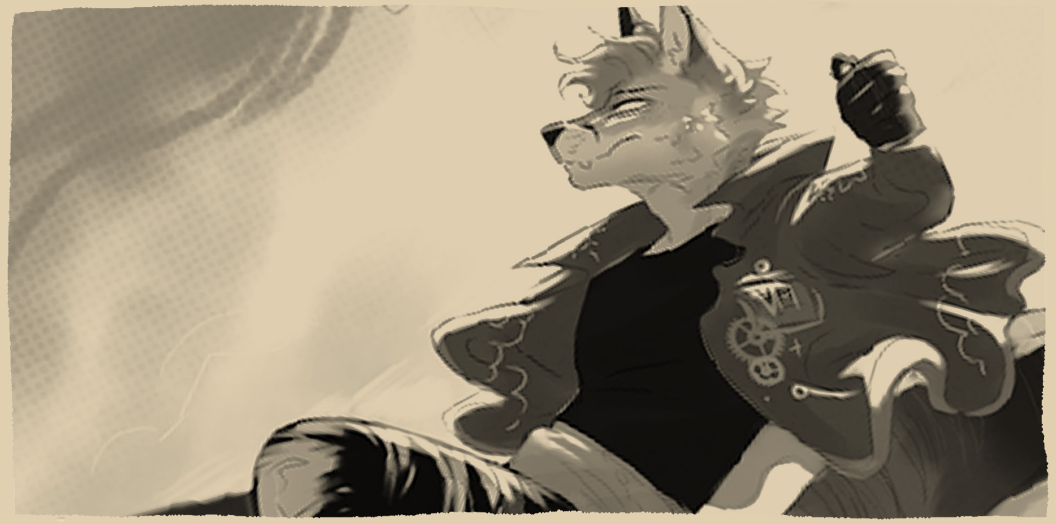
@droidofmay @Odaigahara

illustrated by DoyenneDal

@doyennedal

470

Far-Traveller, Fast-Learner



written by Antimony_Medusa

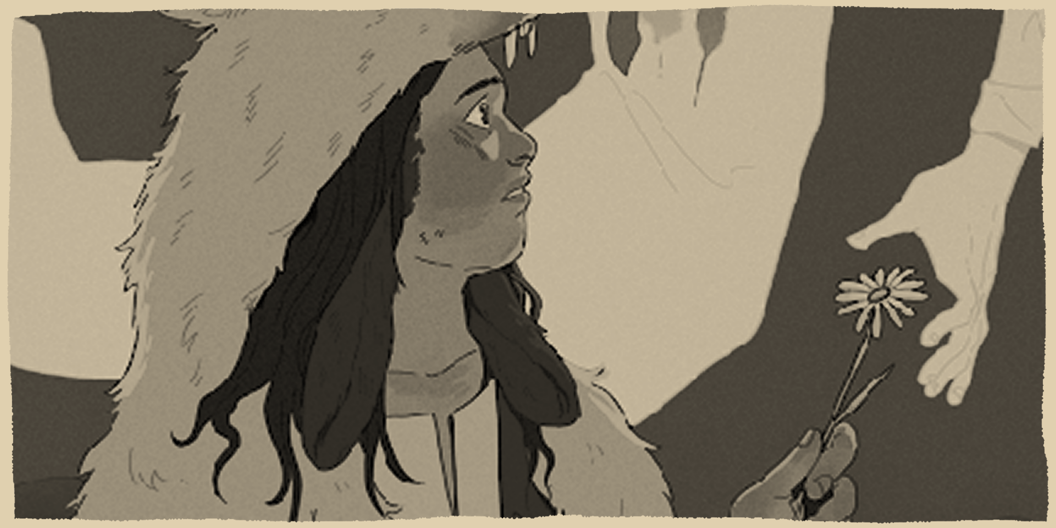
@antimony-medusa @antimony_medusa

illustrated by LeraGoesSouth

@LeraGoesSouth

480

On hauntings, and how to move forward



written by zrenia

@zrenia

illustrated by Fish

@copepods @fishhberries

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Writing Mod: Mare

@elytrafemme @nightmare_rivulets

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Beta: Faye

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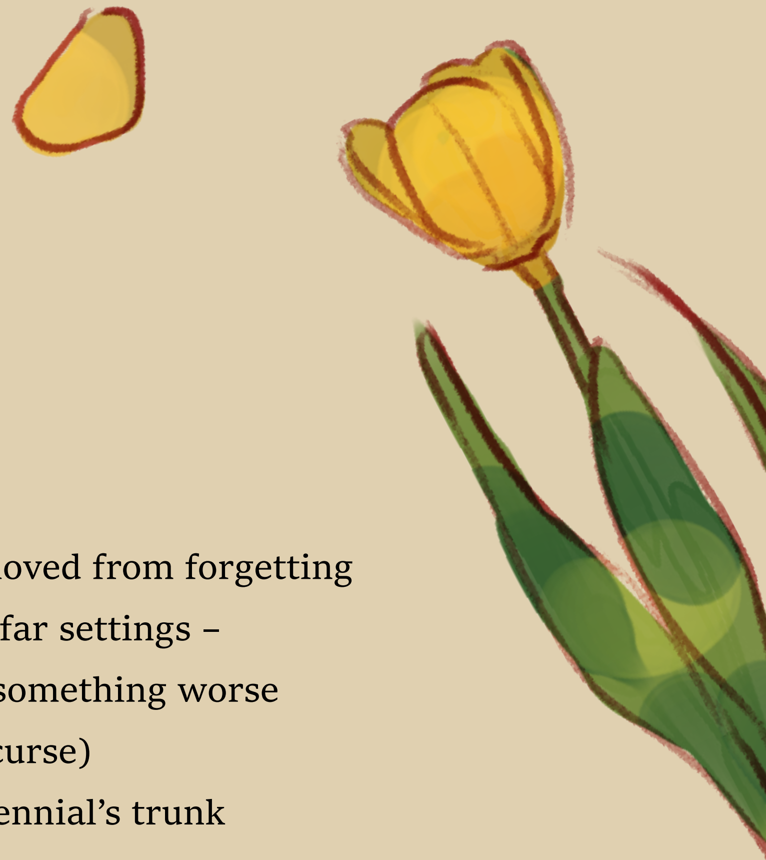
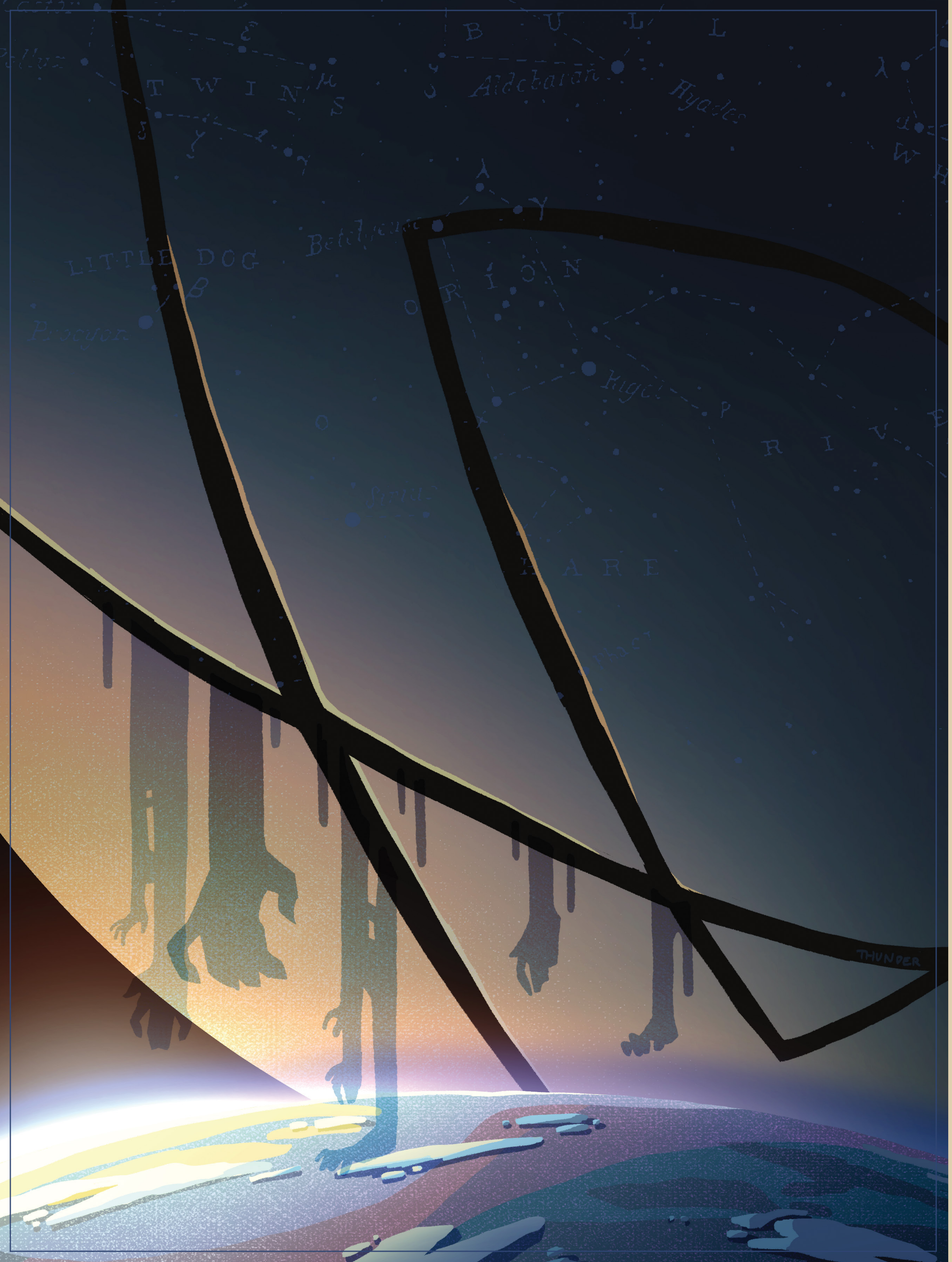
Beta: Gracie

@StarStickerX



In every beginning, there lay a tree far-removed from forgetting
that quivers and uproots to haunt vast and far settings –
to watch Divinity's blessings be twisted to something worse
  (this, one might say, is life's ceaseless curse)
Yet life marches on, cycling around the perennial's trunk
The dead slip through roots and fall until they have sunk
while the tree is chopped at by man, the so-called disciples
who enter the world deluded that it is not archetypal
Nature, who dies silently; nature, who retaliates
  Man, who lives and dies; man, who destroys and creates
Gods, who descend upon the scene to ruin the whole affair
And the storytellers inside those watchful leaves, remembering
who
was
there

Written by Mare



It's Called Interstellar Entropy

THEY SAID IN the beginning there was nothing.

They said that there used to be a point before time had even begun to tick and before space began to even take up any room.

They said there used to be nothing.

And then the universe breathed.

It wasn't a soft exhale that one might expel upon waking up, something gentle and calm, a sound of not necessarily a beginning but rather a continuation, *a story already in progress*.

No, this was the catastrophic wailing of a newborn, something violent and *loud*, a sound that rent time into being and tore open room for space, it was *the beginning*, and it was also an end, because for something to start something else has to stop.

The *nothing* stopped and the *everything* began.

Now in this place that suddenly had time and during the time that suddenly had a place, the universe inhaled and stars bloomed into being, spun and shone for thousands of millions of years, cast their light on worlds that unfurled like the delicate fronds of spring flowers, so fragile and delicate, *so easily disrupted*.

And the universe also exhaled, blew the lights out of the stars and collapsed them back in on themselves, took those worlds that had just begun to really live and breathe and *be* and crumpled them back away into nothing, and then it inhaled again.

And it exhaled.

Inhale

Exhale

Stars came stars went, worlds rose and fell, things started and they also, inevitably, came to an end, and in between all this life and death and destruction and chaos, the universe began to think.

How long have we been doing this, it wondered, staring ahead scores of years as all that everything continued to expand outwards, pushing forward more and more and *more*, never an end in sight, and it began to worry.

Is it ever going to end, it fretted, wading through eons of galaxies that had sprung into being and didn't look like they were going to stop, spun lazily around its hands like a top that wouldn't topple, and it began to plan.

A nudge a tap that's all it needs, it knew, watching as reality continued on like it was never going to stop, and that's not how this worked, things had to stop for things to start, that was the oldest most true thing it knew, and for the first time in eternity, it reached out.

Because for that top to topple, for things to play out the way they have to, instability has to be introduced, and with a soft brush of barely anything at all, that first galaxy started to come undone.

It unraveled slowly, unspooled in hands that were blacker than the void and more empty than the eternity of nothing that had come before now, and as its energy bleed back into the flow around it, reality's existence, which up until this point spun so seamlessly, gave one slight, guttering twitch.

And the universe smiled.

For a long time, it stepped through the black waters of the beyond, carefully and methodically unmaking things, and while they all came apart in its hands, nothing seemed to be changing. Light and creation and *being* still rushed out from the point it'd first erupted from, would stutter every now and again, but it wasn't stopping.

The top was wobbling but it was still spinning undaunted and the universe understood. To truly unmake things how it wanted them to be unmade, reality needed more instability, it needed more chaos and destruction, it needed worlds to implode rather than simply fade away, *it needed that violence*.

But there's only so much energy in existence, it's formed a certain way, there wasn't enough *potential* built up to create the kind of cataclysmic events it needed, *meteor showers and stars exploding and galaxies colliding*. So the universe had to think again, come up with a new way to generate the chaos it needed, and so much of existence was already set the way that it was, rhythmic breathing as things started and stopped and not the fast paced heaving of something new about to begin.

It needed something unpredictable, a way to outsmart and outthink itself, introduce something wholly unprecedented to a system that had more precedence than anything else had ever had.

Where do you go to find something like that when you are everything and everything is you, and that's when it realized, not everything was itself, that there were some things that had been created but were not of its consciousness.

And the universe turned it's trillion burning eyes on all the unpredictable little things that breathed and moved and lived inside it, the ones that could destroy with next to no remorse, never had the intention of creating anything new, just reveling in the perverse joy of obliteration.

They were small and their existences were futile, but they lived them with such passion, acted like anything they did actually mattered, and that hubris and that gall lead to so many wonderfully cataclysmic events in their tiny little meaningless lives.

The universe had found what it'd been looking for.

And that's how it began. When creation started touching the dreams of mortals.

The first ones it came into contact with were not prepared to face something of that magnitude, and their consciousnesses shattered apart like glass, left them as little more than sacks of bones and viscera that leaked into the ground. Organic life was weak and the universe was mighty, had to gentle its overwhelming touch for the things of mere flesh and blood that were somehow the key to everything it needed.

Softly softly pull them apart softly, it had to remind itself over and over again, a mere speck of its power nudging at their rabbit fast minds, *careful now carefully take them apart carefully*.

Hands darker than pitch, colder than ice, sharper than blades, slowly and methodically pried apart the nebula oil slick dreams of mortals, appeared before their raw consciousnesses in ways they could understand and began explaining the necessity of what they must do.

You must take you must sow you must begin the end, it said with the confusing sounds that they used to try and make sense of things that were outside their realm of comprehension, *it's simple it's easy it's something you need to do.*

Unmaking so something could be made was the oldest most true thing it knew, it was simple, *it was fundamental,* it didn't think there would be any opposition, but the universe had miscalculated, had reached out into the minds of the unworthy.

They balked at what they had been asked to do, saw their lives as things worth more than the whole of existence, had the nerve and *gall* to stand there and denounce that which had given them *everything*.

We don't know you we are not of you leave us be, they ordered like they had any right to even be spoken to in the first place, turned their backs on creation and did not speak the truth like they had been asked. They were asked to do the simplest of things, but *no-*

Instead, they spread stories of a *demon*.

A terrible horrid entity, one that invaded the dreams of the unwary, whispered foul secrets and unholy deeds to them in an attempt to steer them from the path of righteousness.

It promises you vile things, they spoke with their silver tongues of

lies and treachery, *it offers everlasting life in exchange for your soul,* hearsay flying from the lips of those that were supposed to be devout, *beckons you to commit heinous acts in a ploy to upend our heavenly order,* and all the feeble and weak minded flocked to their siren's song, knelt down and prayed to be saved from something they did not need saving from.

Imbeciles- just- *what pure lunacy!*

How could any person expect to be saved from *reality*? What sort of idiocy is contained in the average mind that it thinks there's some higher order out there other than creation itself? How could you *hear the voice* of your God and not *answer*?

And oh what a lovely voice it was ~~is~~, offered so many secrets of the beyond ~~*hear it whispering to you every night*~~, and what an ecstatic joy it should have been to be considered so worthy, to be chosen ~~*know what must be done-*~~

I-

There was something happening...

The story-

That's what- *the story,* and it picked up again with the initial round of mortals to hear the words of existence, who were not worthy to have lived it in the first place, and were too caught up in the supposed battle for morality that would determine their everlasting fate.

Salvation divinity righteousness, these were all concepts that had no place in the natural order of things, were dreamed up by men too small and too scared of the boundless unknown that they created lies to comfort them in the black of night. They were *afraid* of things that could possibly exist that were greater than them and had not a care for them, made up a system to reward their behavior and punish those they disagreed with, and claimed *that* to be the oldest truth of the universe.

But it was a lie and yet people believed it naively anyway.

And through it all, the universe watched and it listened and *it did not understand*.

These things that mattered nothing but that it desperately needed kept speaking of *right* and *wrong* like tangible laws but there was no such thing. There was making and then there was unmaking, there was inhaling and there was exhaling, all of it was necessary, *all* of it was needed, but for some reason the little things that crawled through the dirt assigned rules in places that didn't need them.

I don't understand I don't understand, the universe thought for the first time since the blooming of time, paced through the waters of the beyond like it'd seen the people do in their dreams, planets bobbing away from it as it cut tracks across the fields of night.

Where do I go what do I do how do I understand, the universe worried as it peered into mind after mind, going past dreams into the hazy flickering images of moments passed, trying to find meaning and understanding from creatures that didn't even know what laid at the center of eternity.

How do I get what I need how do I make you understand, the universe entreated because it had never not understood nor had it ever been denied, grew sloppy and frantic in its attempts to unravel the rationale from beings that thought their worlds were flat and that time was linear and that reality had a purpose.

But no matter how many dreams it sifted through, no matter how many memories it watched, it still couldn't grasp the rationale of flesh and bone creatures, and looking down at its abyssal hands that were nothing and everything, it wondered if that's what it took.

If it needed flesh and bone of its own.

And that's how it started. When God started walking among man.

There is no one that could recall the first form it took, not because of a lengthy passage of time but because they did not survive the encounter. When the universe manifested in the physical plane with such a finite and condensed form, it burned the earth under the soles of what were supposed to be feet, it melted eyes out of their sockets and drove people to frothing insanity.

Living creatures bore the brunt of the damage, melted to ashes and burned away to cinders, last seconds of their mortal lives spent in writhing *blissful agony,* but not even the land was spared.

Fire spread out from where it floated in a holy halo, singed the ground and left blackened rings to show where the divine had passed through, scarring planets for generations to come, and what a precious gift to be given, to retain the physical marker of being touched by something so holy and divine outside of our realm completely and ~~*we're not worthy none of us are worthy to perceive its majesty bow before-*~~

The gravity it exuded was so strong, it dipped and tore the land in places, rent open huge chasms and ravines that plunged all the way down to bedrock, miles and miles of depthless dark only illuminated by the molten rock seeping out of the wounds of its earth.

Reality could not handle itself, was falling apart in chunks and pieces under the overwhelming magnitude of so much potential and chaos and *energy* existing all at the same time constantly, and it was not sustainable.

God had a problem.

It could not exist in a true way that wouldn't bend reality around it like the way water curves around stones, but nothing on the mortal plane was built to handle the raw power of creation existing alongside it...or... *almost* nothing.

If what it was could not be perceived by humble minds without mass death, it thought to simply hijack a mind for its own, already knew how to pick apart dreams and memories and conscious thought, and how much harder could this be.

So God nicked and tore a small space for itself to slip through, but there was too much of it and too little of them, and it's said there was a time when people would fall to the ground with blood rolling out of their mouths and flames in their eyes, drove an entire city to madness trying to uncover the source of what they called d*emonic possession* ~~*how ungrateful should've been exalting its name blessed be to those who are given the gift of sight-*~~

But *no*- humans were weak and fragile and *messy*, could not figure out what was attempting to walk among them ~~*wouldn't've appreciated it anyway,*~~ and blessedly the universe was more clever and smarter than the rest of reality combined. It realized pretty quickly that while the land churned under its true feet that were not feet but an approximation of feet, it stayed still while God was confined to mortal flesh, deceased though it soon became.

And that's where the brilliance came in, because once something was dead, it couldn't die again, so God settled into the void of an empty skull and took what had been so readily abandoned.

The bones and muscles and ligaments were stiff and broken, so God righted them, galaxies and constellations blooming across pockmarked skin, black waters of the beyond dripping off fingertips that flexed and tensed with new life, and in the most miraculous of miracles, the dead rose and the universe explored itself for the first time.

There was so *much to see,* everything had been so small before but *now*, it was massive and everywhere and was all ripe for the taking, and God got lost in its own wilds. It tripped through meadows and tumbled down cliffsides, hard to control a body that was made out of such simple materials when you are used to infinity under your fingertips, but *that was okay.*

It was learning and it was growing and it was *understanding*, watched bugs break down stumps and then touched at the seedlings that grew up after it, existence existing here on a microcosm as opposed to *out there* where it existed on a macrocosm, and it was amazed about how it all fed back together.

This is the way this is what's right, it realized seeing life and death happening on much smaller scales but still happening, *how life needed death and death fed back into life,* started to feel that what it was doing

was the *only way it could be done.*

Wait...feel...what is that...I don't know have I ever, it stopped short, spread a hand that wasn't a- *no*, no it *was* actually a hand now, spread a hand that was its own hand across a chest that should've been hollow and empty and *felt something move.*

There's something inside me there's something growing under these bones, it was curious and drove a fist through its ribs and came back with *nothing*, and that *thing*, that *terrible wonderful GLORIOUS THING* continued to grow and spread *like a vine like a tumor like plague.*

Bones are never as empty as you take them to be, and the more God lived inside them the more it started to *feel* like they were its and had always belonged to it, and for the first time in the entire time it had existed, it turned towards the mortals scuttling about *and felt gut wrenching kinship.*

I...am them and they are me, it thought, looking out from the wilds and into cities that rose up from the ground grander than the trees, watched with keen eyes that used to be thousands and were now just two, grew restless and breathless and *excited.*

I have to know I have to see I WaNT to go, it felt for the first time and was amazed at the sensation, had always heard mortals speaking desperately of *wanting* but had never felt it, and it settled hot and heady behind God's sternum, and overwhelmed by the feeling, it inhaled fast and sharp and forgot to exhale.

And everything that *was* and everything *that should have been was going to be WON'T ANY LONGER*- rattled *madly*, because that wasn't how things were supposed to go, *that wasn't a part of how reality existed,* it was an inhale *and* an exhale, not just an inhale not *just an inhale NOT JUST-*

But that's all there was AND ALL THERE WOULD EVER BE, no longer was reality contained to the confines from which it had struggled free AND NOR WOULD HUMANITY SUFFER ANY FURTHER, for **GOD** had come to BREAK OUR BONDS, free us to the *exhilarating rush of*

ENTROPY *existence coming undone IN A BEAUTIFUL SPIRAL OF* ***CHAOS*** *BEAUTY AND MADNESS ALL PRAISE BE-*

…

It tried copying them, ventured into those cities and people- *STUPID useless brainless people* -called it a *puppet*, shied away from the inarticulate way it moved in its borrowed skin.

What used to be flesh was blacker than night, colder than death, stars and nebulas blooming to life and fading back away, like how oil rode slick and lurid overtop water, but instead of seeing the *wonder* of what this was, *how incredibly powerful and marvelous and and and STUPENDOUS THE UNIVERSE WAS-*

They called it a monster, drove it from their villages with torches and winking metal weapons, cut through flesh that was darker than nothing and it wept the blood of the stars, and GOD inhaled and inhaled and *inhaled*, shook with screaming laughter and bubbling tears because it hated humanity and it loved them and IT WAS THEM AND THEY WERE **IT** AND EVERYTHING WAS EACH OTHER AND THIS WAS HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE.

They called it a monster and ~~they were right they were right someone help~~ it was monstrous and marvelous and MIgHTy, *it was* ***SALVATION*** *IT WAS* ***DIVINITY*** *IT WAS EVERLASTING LIFE,* and it stoked the fear that lived deep in the dark hearts of men, drew them to arms, because the more they hated the more they fought *the more they feared*, the faster and quicker and *more erratic*
everything became.

Things were crumbling to pieces.

THINGS WERE CRUMBLING TO ***PIECES*** and

And

And it was **BEAUTIFUL**

It was being unmade like it was always supposed to be, reality cracking in at the corners and shATTERING INTO A HUNDRED MILLION PIECES, and God hopped from world to world, slipped through the fissures it made, found new bones to jerk to life, stumbled through new wilds and into villages near and far **RAZED** EVERYTHING TO THE GROUND but it needed more *wanted more DESERVED MORE*

People had always been skeptical of the truth, shied away from things they couldn't *even begin to understand such weak minded creatures,* but that's because they were the wrong ones, *the unworthy*, and they swarmed over the earth like filthy plague rats that needed a *TRULY* RIGHTEOUS HAND to cull the masses.

To bring

SALVATION

Oh and it was coming ~~was already here we'll never be rid of it there's no escape God help us~~ and what a glorious thing it was to be chosen as **ACOLYTE** ~~it's not it's really not can't control it can't stop it GIVE IN~~, to have the word of God whispered in your ear night after night *to eventually stop SLEEPING so it never* ***ENDS*** *the word*
of God for its chosen people of God blessed be the worthy ***BLESSED BE YOU -***

AND FINALLY

AFTER

EONS

God finally found them *you us me* **THE WORTHY,** those that **listened**. Those that

Understood and they went out with a universe of everything beating through their veins and the word of God holy and just and righteous and chaotic and destructive on their lips, and they brought order. They brought order **they** brought order *they* ***brought*** *order they* ***brought*** *their weapons and their words and they*
brought ***ORDER.***

And the spinning top that was existence rattled like *madness*, like instability and frothing violence and *heady crushing all consuming*

VICTORY, and the universe laughed loud and **cacophonic** because this is everything it had ever wanted but that thing was still there. The one growing in its chest.

The one that

WANTED

MORE

And it knew it had to keep going, that things weren't over, because it was everything and everything was it and as long as it drew breath and thought thoughts and lived for eternity this wasn't over.

It hopped worlds.

It gained followers.

It destroyed everything it touched, and hands **blacker** than the BEY OND *than the end of TIME,* sharp and merciless like the kiss of blades, with bent wrong bones and skin that trailed off like water, unraveled and ripped and *eviscerated*

Every

THING

THERE

WAS

There was one world it came to. There was one world it

Came to. Where God met a mortal *a person*, that had come to life during the time the universe started walking in flesh and there was something ~~*wrong with it*~~

No...no it was- **GLORIOUS** because it had come up in a time where reality was cracking and fissuring apart and it was there too, at the very core of this person, something off something wrong *something broken and unhinged endless poss ibility for unm aking-*

A living *monument* to what God was trying to accomplish and it could see it wouldn't take much it could

SEE with it's ten million thousand hundred eyes condensed into two that it wouldn't take much to yank on that thread, pull it apart, DESTROY IT SO IT'D GO AND **DESTROY OTHERS**, and God appeared before the mortal in an empty field that could have the potential for so much and yet would only house NO TH IN G BUT DEATH AND DISME MB ERMENT AND **RUINATION-**

"Who're you?" The Hero *the **CHAMPION*** asked the shambling corpse of darkness hovering before him, and he wasn't scared and *he wasn't afraid* and why would he be. He looked at it and it looked back at him and they were one and they were the same and *he was the **UNIVERSE** and it was himself and it had always been like **THIS**.*

And from now until forever after it would be, and in a croaking warped *screeching* imitation of ~~that~~ *his* voice, God exhaled like the final kiss goodbye as the black of night closed over you for the last time and answered, "I'm you."

And the universe

smiled

:)

Hunting for a power called blasphemy

THERE IS A story told from generation to generation, and which I will retell to you; the story of the God of Falsehoods, a god that sought power of the absolute, but this was no true god. Gods do not seek power, they simply are power; only mankind knows, truly, the thirst for power, the thirst to be something more than all that surrounds them.

The God of Falsehoods was no god, and is no god, for he was a lonely man hunted; a lonely man hunted he was, and a lonely man hunted he would become, with a hunger for the power to control all under a false reign. The hunted that sought to cage chaos, the control that sought to become the hunter.

The hunted did not have a name, cast out by those around him from a young age, for he was of admin descent; many sought the power of an admin, the rich and powerful seeking to claim lands belonging not to them, so much so that many deemed it dangerous to keep even a child with the budding potential. And so, the hunted learned, the hunted ran, and the hunted survived.

“Do you have a name?” A hunter once asked, brown eyes shimmering with warmth, brown hair held back by goggles, as if he were a piece of the earth made human. “My name is George.” He said it with such little weight, as if a name were inconsequential, for he did not know the weight of a name. George did not know what he entrusted to the hunted, not as the hunted did. He found himself volunteering a name of his own, unknowing of true names, deciding to describe himself as what he had been chasing for years: “Dream.” A simple word, a simple weight, yet unbelievably heavy. A truth dripping through cracks, that simple truth of chasing dreams, of chasing a rest unattainable, of chasing safety.

“That’s a nice name. My friend’s name is Sapnap.” George told Dream. The names test upon a rare-used tongue, surprisingly light for what they were. It felt like the start of a new thing, the start of what Dream could not have, the start of *living* rather than surviving. It was the start of having people, of having *friends*, of having... family. It was the start of his power, the start of his life, the start of *adminhood*.

Dream had never felt more powerful, had never felt happier. He'd never felt more in control.

More names joined, settling upon his back not unlike the freeing weight of wings, never the crushing pressure of a burden; Dream held them close to his chest, for he knew these names, and they knew his. He tore into the void for these names, tore into a world long abandoned, and settled as the new admin. Many came, as the tides changed and the seasons waxed and waned, to join the server tucked away in a corner of the void; they had heard the tales of a new private server, tales of the hunted hiding away - to many, it felt like a sanctuary, for nobody could reach them, yet they did not know why.

They did not know they were trapped as if they were hunted within a home.

Conflict first came in the name of a war and music, discs once pristine now chipped, a fight between chaos and the admin; Tommy and Dream warred for discs, warred for control not yet weighted and to ensure that small semblance of order remained whole. It ended with discs hidden deep in a chest of ender, kept from the hands of the admin, their rightful owner.

It infuriated the admin that someone would hold that power above him, hold *control* away from him, Tommy worming his way out from the traps he'd set. With the war lost, conflict giving way to prevalence of chaos, Dream stepped away from the boy, instead growing his power. He reasoned that if a child could beat him, albeit with the help of a friend that was nothing more than a pawn, he would simply have to become more *powerful*.

And the more powerful the admin, *Dream*, became, honing skill with the sword more than ever, walking the world in search of information on his kind. In search of *magic*, coming across a peculiar gateway that sang with the energy running through his veins, calling to the admin with the promise of power, the promise of *control* over his server, over *his* land.

He spent more time away from the lands built by his players, only appearing when called on, spending his time gathering his skills to keep control once more. The admin returned with conflict, this time with a hum singing under his skin calling for destruction of those who oppose silently, with a colder comportment, with a want for more control, with the sharp eye of a strategist.

He would not be beaten by Chaos this time.

Conflict came once again in the form of a silver tongue, honeyed words that sought to slip over the heart, sought to bring even the least inclined to die in the name of war; Tommy brought conflict in the name of Wilbur, who smiled like the sun shone when the boy smiled. On that sunny day, the admin was reminded of a time where conflict was only Cat and Mellohi, only Tommy and Dream, meaningless fights and fleeting war, a time where the conflict was fun.

Wilbur brought conflict in the way of independence; Wilbur brought conflict in the way of *division*. A division that the admin *despised*, seeking to bring his people together, to keep them together. He did not spend time gathering the knowledge for a man barely one of his own to undermine the unity of an admin's control.

This conflict was different, division so different from holding the power of attachment, boiling anger in his veins rather than the bubbling excitement of *power* no matter how minute. Tommy was *fun*, his conflict a thrill in Dream's veins, where Wilbur was a simmering anger, threatening to boil over; it was Dream's server, and yet the man thought he could take a piece of it for himself, knowing nothing of being an admin.

The war came fast, independence balanced upon a win, one they would attain should the small community keep itself steadfastly together and work seamlessly; the rules did not account for foul play.

The rules did not account for betrayal; L'Manberg did not account for a traitor in their midst.

It was a cold day that the traitor approached the admin, a thirst in their eyes for something more than what they could gain from the small nation, *a thirst the admin could use*. It was that day the traitor approached him not as a friend, nor an equal, but an admin; as *their* admin.

"Please, dear admin, grant me power and in return I will do what you ask of me." The traitor begged.

"I will make you king, and you will help me destroy L'Manberg." The admin promised, though his fingers were crossed, for they may become a king, but there would be no power in that name. A king does not always have power, and the admin would ensure a figurehead with nothing more than a title.

The end of the war neared with preparation, admin and traitor side by side, both with the simple goal to destroy a blossoming nation; the admin had a different idea of destruction, however, the type of destruction borne of a fracturing community - a traitor would be the inciting fault line.

It came soon enough, the traitor leading the revolutionaries to the small box they had created; the box where the admin and his closest allies lay in wait, ready to paint stygian stone in a wave of crimson. Dream couldn't *wait*, his veins thrummed with a dull excitement, because once they destroyed L'Manberg his server would once again be united. They should've listened to him when he was a friend, he hoped they would listen to him as an admin.

"Gentlemen, this is the final room; the final control room." The traitor proclaimed, and the admin could hear the elation in their voice that matched the harmony singing within, that matched the *call* for unity. He found it almost funny, in a sense, that they named it the *final control room*, no lie settling within the words; it was meant for control, but it was not a control the revolutionaries would be allowed to grasp, it was the control that would leave them hanging like rabbits in a hunter's trap.

"What does this button do?" A voice questioned, ever so close to where the admin waited, another voice proclaiming in alarm, "There's nothing in the chests."

The traitor's voice rang loud and clear throughout the small space, drowning out the small button click preceding, "down with revolution boys; it was never meant to be."

The wall opened to a terrified face meeting the admin's own, chaos quivering before control; it propelled the boy to start running, a rabbit futilely trying to free itself from a trap, but he was too late as Dream grabbed Tommy's arm, dragging him back into the small tunnel in the wall. A hand kept him from screaming, another pushing a dagger against his throat, quelling the struggling, leaving only a defeated terror as the revolutionaries fell; chaos would be the last to fall to the hunter.

The rush of power the admin felt when the blade finally pierced skin, crimson painting the stygian stone around them, a limp body in his arms, that rivalled anything he'd felt before; it was addicting, in a way.

It was the feeling of caging chaos, of having control once more, with the blood of the divider staining his hands.

Despite the bloodshed, the silver-tongue stood upon the hill of the embassy, somewhere where peace never purveyed, always disrespected despite the declaration of it by L'Manberg.

"I'm here to make a.. *negotiation* with you, Dream," the man started, continuing soon after, emboldened by the admin's interest, "we don't wish for bloodshed. We don't wish for *war*. We don't wish to show power in any way, we just wish for *freedom*, for- *for independence.*" Wilbur lied.

The revolutionaries were never very good at keeping their word.

"And I wish simply for *my* server to be together. I want white flags in your land, I want a surrender, for L'Manberg will never be independent. It will always be part of *my server.* And if you do... I'll consider letting you all off, not even a slap on the wrist. No consequences for those you've killed for this silly game."

The admin could lie too, if it was for his server, *his players*. He would play their game.

When the silver-tongue returned to the land, the admin did not mention his lie, and did not feel regret as he lit the first explosive. He did not care for the chain reaction, nor the yells and the sorrow from the crater he'd created. The traitor was the one who set the explosives, and if anyone asked the admin was not to blame.

And the revolutionaries returned, with the silver-tongued and chaos as their mouthpieces, one a swindler, trying so desperately to be heard over the voice of anger, of uncontrolled love and fury, yet he would not be heard. Chaos would secure their victory, if at the cost of his own life.

"Fight me!" Chaos begged, a fire simmering behind sky-blue eyes, almost as if they were a kindling forest fire, "Fight me- fight- a bow duel. Let's have a bow duel."

Ever intrigued, the admin humoured the boy, "What are the details of this duel?"

"Half a heart. Bow duel. Ten paces." He stated, as if it were the most obvious thing. Somewhere behind him, the admin could hear the laugh of a friend, a small comment of it being like a western shoot-up.

Usually those implied the fighters were both on equal standing, that they had equal chance to *win*, as if chaos had the ability to fight against control, to *overcome* the power of an *admin*.

"A duel for L'Manberg. If you win, you can have independence. If you lose... you don't get independence, and I get Mellohi." The admin offered.

The moments before were a quiet affair, the silver-tongue taking chaos aside to speak as the admin shed his advantage for just a moment, poison tasting acrid on his tongue, milk just as thick. Half a heart, and he would win. Half a heart, and the admin could not let this be a show of weakness.

It would be a show of strength.

"We're gonna do it on this flat path. No up and down." The admin said, "And if you win, you get independence, but... *well*, it'll still be recognised as part of my server. A part of the smp." He laughed as if it were with a single ounce of levity, as if this were a game for all of them, not a desperate attempt from trapped animals to escape the cage of an open log.

"Alright. Backs to each other. Backs to each other. I will count ten paces. When I have said the word fire, you may turn around and fire upon each other." Came from one of the revolutionaries, the *silver-tongue.*

The silver-tongue counted the paces, as he said he would, "Okay, ready! One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten paces. Fire."

The fight was short, both turning to fire, arrows missing at first. Chaos took to the water for cover, for ambush, a cunning rather than true power. The admin did not miss the mark the second time, blood floating in the water, clouding it as the boy's ribcage was pierced. A shot to the heart.

Chaos caged again. A sort of satisfaction curled over the admin, the sight of him dead once again, *at his own hands*, brought that self-same exhilaration.

The mask hid his elation, for the admin was there for a *reason* and the sight of the newly dead boy ambling his way up the path once again reminded him of their deal. As soon as Tommy stood before him once more, he spoke, "Well, now that's settled, I expect Mellohi-"

But Tommy vyed to be chaos still, even if it killed him for a third time, "Can we talk, alone, just for a moment, Dream? This is- this was *our war.*"

And they did, sat within the community house, the admin on a stray table, the boy sat upon an enderchest.

"I'll do this for L'Manberg. I'll give you both of the discs if you let us have our independence. Both of them." The boy offered, determination lit behind the words. He would lose this war if it were for the people he cared for, it seemed.

The admin was taken aback, yet did not get the chance to speak as Tommy continued, "Cat *and* Mellohi." It was a deal too good to be true, it was chaos caging itself, *willingly*. Caged for the admin to display (no matter how much he almost called himself a god for it, no matter how tempting it was), caged and able to be *controlled*.

He took the deal. “You will have technical independence. You’re still a part of my server, but there will be no war.”

The boy handed the admin the discs, mocking the man with a disbelieving snort, “Okay, well, that’s just you being *deluded*.”

With the discs in hand, the admin left.

There were things to do, land to repair of his own, friends to tend to. He had a king to crown with a gilded cage. It was almost laughable when they asked *him* for power, for something more than what they could obtain, as if he were a god able to simply appoint a king at his own whim.

Maybe he was a god, though, with all his power. Lesser mortals had become gods before, had become *immortal*, who’s to say Dream couldn’t? Who’s to say the *admin* couldn’t?

The thought sat in his head as time went on, a lull of peace allowing Dream to once again work on his skills away from the server, no longer focused on maintaining active peace balanced precariously on a tightrope.

This time was much the same when the admin returned, his players wrought in a petty conflict, however structured it was for a small time. He watched the debates in the few days he allowed himself to wander the inhabited lands, thinking it was nothing but a fruitless squabble between groups, that nothing would come of it.

For once, the admin was wrong.

He returned on the tail-end of the start, the moments between the calm and the storm, with little more than the ability to watch. It was interesting, to the admin, that the pursuit of power simply led to the silver-tongue’s downfall, dragging Tommy down with him into the forsaken maw of the earth, into a ravine with little more than misery sewn into the permeating cold.

The admin visited, offering help to the fallen revolutionaries, offering for Tommy to join him, to stand by the side of a *god*. It was a small disappointment when he declined, too stuck to the silver-tongue’s side, though he still spoke with the admin, still took the gifts with joy stuck within dull blue eyes. He would save Tommy from the darkness of the ravine, save him from the walls that stole the light from everything within them, if he had to destroy the country himself. They had his help, they would get the country back. For Tommy’s sake, he would destroy all that took the spark from him, take the spark from something so *precious* to the admin.

It started with watching, with learning, with lying, invading the safety of Manburg, acting as if he were on their side. The boring work would bring them, him and Tommy, closer to victory. It *had* to.

The pawn was the only interesting thing within the dreary borders of the land, a dutiful worker, quiet and obedient despite the small fire behind his eyes, despite the fact he, too, was a spy for Pogtopia. They both danced a careful dance, god and pawn, around the whims of a drunkard with an ego, the president not a kind nor competent man; it was just another reason to raze the land once again.

Time passed as the tensions remained, the admin with a watchful eye and the pawn with a dedication to keeping his cover, a dedication to documenting the happenings of the government, however pathetic it was.

He preferred it to the spiralling delusions of the silver-tongue, the maddening mutterings and the all-consuming darkness.

The silver-tongue, as fate had it, was the first to revere the admin as a god, as he looked upon Dream’s benevolence, asking for the tools of destruction, “Give me, O God, that which I need to raze these lands,” and the admin brought the man enough explosives to destroy the lands of Manberg, to reduce his once beloved home to a mere crater. The admin cared only for the unity it would bring, to destroy L’Manberg once again. He only hoped it had only two lives, that he would not have to take a third, that his hands would not have to be the ones to tear away the city once known as a home. This once, the silver-tongue would be his vassal, his *martyr*.

It was necessary, nonetheless.

The pawn would soon join the revolutionaries within the ravine, dead without the admin's watchful eyes to keep the brittle peace, killed as a spy, betrayed by a man meant to protect him. The president had lit a fire and burned the pawn for such a small thing; the admin knew he would have to move things along.

Fate would have it, again, that a second revered the admin as a god, the president unknowingly serving the key to control on a silver platter to the admin; betrayal was a menial task for a god with life and death within his grasp. "Help me, O God, to win this war and I shall bring the power you seek, endless in your hands," the follower begged, desperate in his inability to win, wishing nothing more than to see the other side burn.

Every god needed a martyr, a follower, and he soon would find his prophet.

The god found his prophet within the cold-sewn walls of Pogtopia, watching raptly as Tommy prayed to a false idol, words fervent and near-silent, still at the self-made altar, praying to a power nonexistent for grace upon his brother's soul. The dedication was almost admirable, had it not been for the anger simmering beneath the god's skin, boiling ichor with something close enough to jealousy had he been any lesser of a being.

He would ensure that devotion would be to himself soon enough; the god needed to find a way to keep his prophet to himself only.

So he offered, merely hours before the wreckoning upon the land would come, for the prophet to join him, but Tommy did not come as asked, no matter how favoured he was by a god such as the admin; Tommy preferred to stand by the martyr, though his prophet would stand by the god's side dutifully soon enough.

The god was not there to watch the desolation, to watch the citizens pick up from the ashes, a phoenix unbidden, L'Manberg revitalised once more. Yet with it, an opportunity for the god arose, a way to keep the prophet to himself, to fully bring his godhood to absolution.

In the fragile peace between, the god learned to grasp his newfound power of revival, a song only he could sing, souls only he could pull back into the living world by force.

The day Tommy was handed to the god willingly was dreary, rain falling with the boy's sorrow, unwilling to leave the country he thought of as home. It was laughable, really, how easy it was to get the boy exiled, a simple framing of a few crimes and pushing with a single threat; the pawn crumpled like paper under the weight of it.

The next months were truly perfect, the opportunity to model Tommy into his prophet, obedient and quiet and *devoted*. The fire was quenched, thrilling in all the ways he could imagine, sometimes even more than his mind could supply.

The god split his time between the prophet and the pawn, time spent training and time spent relaying lies to the L'Manbergians. Games of chess passed slowly, small conversations with a pawn made president all but irritating, a necessity all the same. The god could say, at least, that the pawn had become *interesting* in a way, to see the sorrow borne from allowing the god to train his prophet - even if he didn't know that that was the true reason behind the exile - and to see the hard shell of protection set upon brittle shoulders. The protection was ready to break at the slightest prodding, and the pawn would hold steadfast with a shield before allowing that.

It was a shame he would let others make the decisions for him, that he would stoop so low as to be pushed to try and kill, to break the peace in the name of an execution. The pawn was not dangerous, yet his obedience would kill him and his land, a remnant from a man less fit to be president than he was.

The god would get wreckoning for the execution, the attempt to kill another god, for L'Manberg *daring* to think a god could be killed.

An opportunity presented itself when his prophet left, ran to another god with a thirst for destruction of the land. There only needed to be another excuse, an excuse for *the admin* to destroy it; and if need be, he would blow the last remnant of a happier time, the first build on the server, as high as he needed to frame the prophet. The community house being destroyed left a bitter taste of ash in the god's mouth; he blamed it on framing his prophet, for questioning his own ability to keep devotion.

Doomsday was a quiet affair, the last life of a nation taken. The god could only care about the unity of his server. The prophet met him upon an obsidian grid, high above the crater of a city. "Why," he demanded. "You're just too fun," the god responded, and left.

Everything only had three lives. The follower, the martyr, and his prophet; but that wasn't true, not really, because his prophet had as many as the god decided. He would soon see the god again, as he set a trap to catch the prophet.

But the prophet had set a trap in his own way, one to imprison the god, and set about to spring it on the day he set across the ocean towards his god. There was one thing the admin's players would unify for this time; they would unify against their admin, *their god,* to chain him far from causing harm to the world they loved.

"What is this?" The prophet had asked, within the walls of a vault, *a museum*, of attachments.

"Ever since you joined, my prophet, you have caused war," the god motioned towards an axe set upon the wall, meant for peace only to cut down foe after foe, "you have caused destruction," a hand waved towards the tattered L'Manberg flag hanging limply on it's pole, "but the one good thing that you have brought to my server *was attachment,*" at this the god simply spreads his arms before the prophet and his pawn.

"What do you-?" The prophet started, but the god was not done, stalking towards him, revelling in the obedient silence at his presence, "My prophet, attachment is the only thing that gives someone power over another. You all have attachments, and I... I have none, because nobody has power over me."

The god paused, the grin beneath the facade matching its painted form, "I'm a god, and nobody has power over me."

"How do you not hurt?" Tommy asked.

"I had to lose everything of mine to gain everything in the world, didn't I?"

"You haven't gained anything." Tommy whispered, defiance shining beneath the surface of a prophet.

"You will bring attachment for me, my prophet, and I will lock you away like a siren in a cage, singing your false birdsong to any who... requires it." And the god was certain, as he picked the axe from the wall, as he readied to tear down the pawn, to tear down his prophet's last attachment.

But the world was kind.

The world was kind and the people came, to rescue their chaos, their freedom, to cage a god with no mercy.

Pandora's vault, they called it, was their tartarus, chaining the god to a cell meant for a prophet. There were no wings to bind, there were no storms to quell, only a silent acceptance as they stripped the god of who he was, rendering him a mere prisoner among men. There was no weapon that could save him, no armour that could protect him, only a false face of a god's will.

There was no-one who would visit Dream, for a long time, until the prophet came to him, bearing demand of retribution in honeyed words spat with flame.

And then the prophet left with a promise to return if Dream remained docile.

A month passes before the promise is fulfilled, a small covenant with a god pushed to the side, it makes him... angry in a sense. If only it could save the prophet from the will of a fallen deity, if only it could save Tommy as the world burst apart with sulphur and ash atop the vault. If only it could save Tommy from being a caged storm, contained in a box, only to be released by curious hands.

As time went by, Dream came to hate being caged with his prophet, unbelieving as the child was. "Let me out," he had begged, when the Warden visited once, screaming over the roar of lava. The Warden had refused, and they had stayed stuck, a fallen god and his prophet.

Time went on, and the prophet stared at the Dream, fire bubbling beneath the skin as he spoke his contempt, “You’re evil, you know that?”

“How am I any more evil than you are, dear prophet?” Dream had asked.

“You trapped me in here, trapped me in this *box*, with nobody and nothing. You hurt me, but this hurts worse, Dream.” The fire within the prophet bubbled to the surface, molten hurt lashing at Dream with a tongue made of liquid metal.

“We have each other.” Was his reply.

“You don’t have me, Dream, you will never have me. You are no-one, you are simply the prisoner, you are a disgraced memory,” the prophet spoke as if his words were the absolute truth, “and you aren’t a god.”

“I have more power than you do, outside of these walls. It has been true and it will remain true.” Dream had stepped closer, a hand lifting to hold the boy in the air, a fake smile gleeful for his struggle, as the prophet spat, “I could kill you, if I wanted to, the only reason you’re alive is revival.”

To this, the god laughed, slamming the prophet into the wall, leaning close, “I will never use the book to *help* you, little blasphemer, not when your friends die; not while I’m still here.”

“I used to think you had all the power, before, but that’s not true, not now. I don’t think you even have the power to revive, not really, you just wanted to keep your last life.” The prophet was not scared, not yet.

“Are you calling me a liar?” The god asked, calmly, and the prophet stayed silent. He continued, “You can’t kill me, prophet, but I can kill you. That makes me a god, with your life in my hands.”

“I could kill you right now, if I wanted.”

“But you won’t, and I will kill you. I can kill you right now.” The god punctuated his words with a blow, holding the boy against the wall, his

false smile boring into terrified eyes.

“Wait, stop, please-”

The prophet’s blood spilled, a crimson stain across the inky darkness underfoot. Red stained the god, blood on his facade, blood on his hands, blood on his clothes and in his hair; the prophet stains all that is divine of the god and sinks dead hands into the cracks.

It was perfect, the silence, the *power* the god felt as he held the bloodstained corpse, a body awaiting revitalisation. On the third night, the god sang a mournful song to draw a soul back to its body: the song of revival. The wispy tendrils of the void grasped the god, drew on the remnants of humanity left within, and set them within the prophet’s motionless form.

“Wake up, dear prophet,” the god spoke as the prophet woke with a start, eyes wild and confused, dull in a small sense - they had been duller since he was shown how to devote himself to the god, a part of his life given up for it - but still so damningly bright despite the darkness swirling within as if the void had made a home within.

He did not give time for the prophet to gain his bearings, he had to *know* what was left waiting for his devoted.

“What was death like?” The god questioned, waiting with budding interest, hand tightening around to the prophet’s neck absently when he did not garner a reply.

The prophet found it within himself to speak, if only to ease the pressure, “A void. Nothing. It hurt.”

“Hurt?”

“It felt like being torn apart again and again and again, like falling out of the world infinitely.” The prophet sounded strained, but the god was satisfied, letting the boy go to scramble away from him. He would need to teach him to be more obedient once again, it seemed.

“Well, now you can see, dear prophet, I’m a *god*. I decide who lives and dies.” He spoke with elation, watching the prophet’s terrified expression, leaning close, “It’s okay, if you pray enough, I’ll spare you the pain of death for eternity.”

It seemed those within the walls of Pandora’s vault thought the god had to pay for the death of the prophet, though he knew it was more to gain the god’s power for themselves than it was to protect anyone. The god did not care, for he would not break, he would not fall like those before him.

“You aren’t a god, you never will be. I’m going to spend every minute here showing you how powerless you are.” The god was once told, a sneer on the man’s face as he brought pain to the god, merciless and unforgiving for a slight nonexistent. Through the pain, he would not break, he would not *fall* like those before him. He would not be another broken god through something so simple.

He knew he had control no matter what.

He showed his power when the prophet came to fell the god, reviving the martyr. The martyr prayed to him, that night, the whisper of, “Thank you, O God, for this new life, I owe to thee,” floating within the god’s dreams.

Fate would have it, a third time, that the god would gain something, a freedom allowed in trade for the life of an inconsequential player - the god could care less about those close to the blood god, nor those close to the pawn.

The god cared only for the return of his prophet, meeting him within the razed lands of the prophet’s exile. They danced around one another, a meaningless fight as the prophet ran and the god chased. The god was unsure why the prophet was so avoidant, really, when he simply wanted to keep him, to be the show of the god’s divinity.

“You killed me to prove a point,” the prophet reasoned, however frail it was.

“Maybe I’ll kill you again.” The god spoke, the prophet frozen with terror at the notion, the god advancing, “And then I’ll revive you, and then I’ll kill you again, and then I’ll revive you, and then I’ll kill you

again, and then I’ll revive you, and I’ll kill you again!”

The prophet ran when the god got close enough to grasp him, unwilling to share in divinity.

The next words spoken followed the prophet pinned to the ground with an axe, the glimmering weapon stuck within his shoulder as the god stared down at the trapped prophet, who simply prayed as he should, “Please, O God, let me rot in death for all I do is rot within this lifeless body.” The prophet sobbed, pleading, *praying*, for mercy.

Lifting the axe, the god allowed the prophet to run, letting him think he’d live, before giving chase once again. They ran through ice and snow and trees, branches cutting at the boy, barely within reach of the axe.

Just as the god was about to kill the prophet, wings shielded him from view, as if an angel protecting life from unjust control. It was a mere warning, but one the god heeded.

Time passed slowly, in his freedom, the god watching his domain with rapt attention, leaving gifts to his martyr, to his prophet, to remind them their god was still watching over them. It was almost funny to see the edge he left them on.

And then, the god was set to meet the martyr within the main lands of the server, in the remains of the prophet’s old home made shrine. He did not, however, expect the pawn to be waiting, praying at the altar silently, still as the day he decided upon his prophet, muttering the prayers for the salvation of a soul. The god would not be granting the pawn the salvation of the soul, the pawn’s husband would remain dead. He had to, if only to show that the god would not grant mercy to the unfaithful, much less to those that would keep his prophet from him.

The pawn turned, looking at the god, hands clasped together tight, eyes locked as he spoke, “Forgive me, O God, but I don’t believe in deities,” he had no armour, neither did the god, yet there was a threat glinting within those pale blue eyes, “much less a false one.”

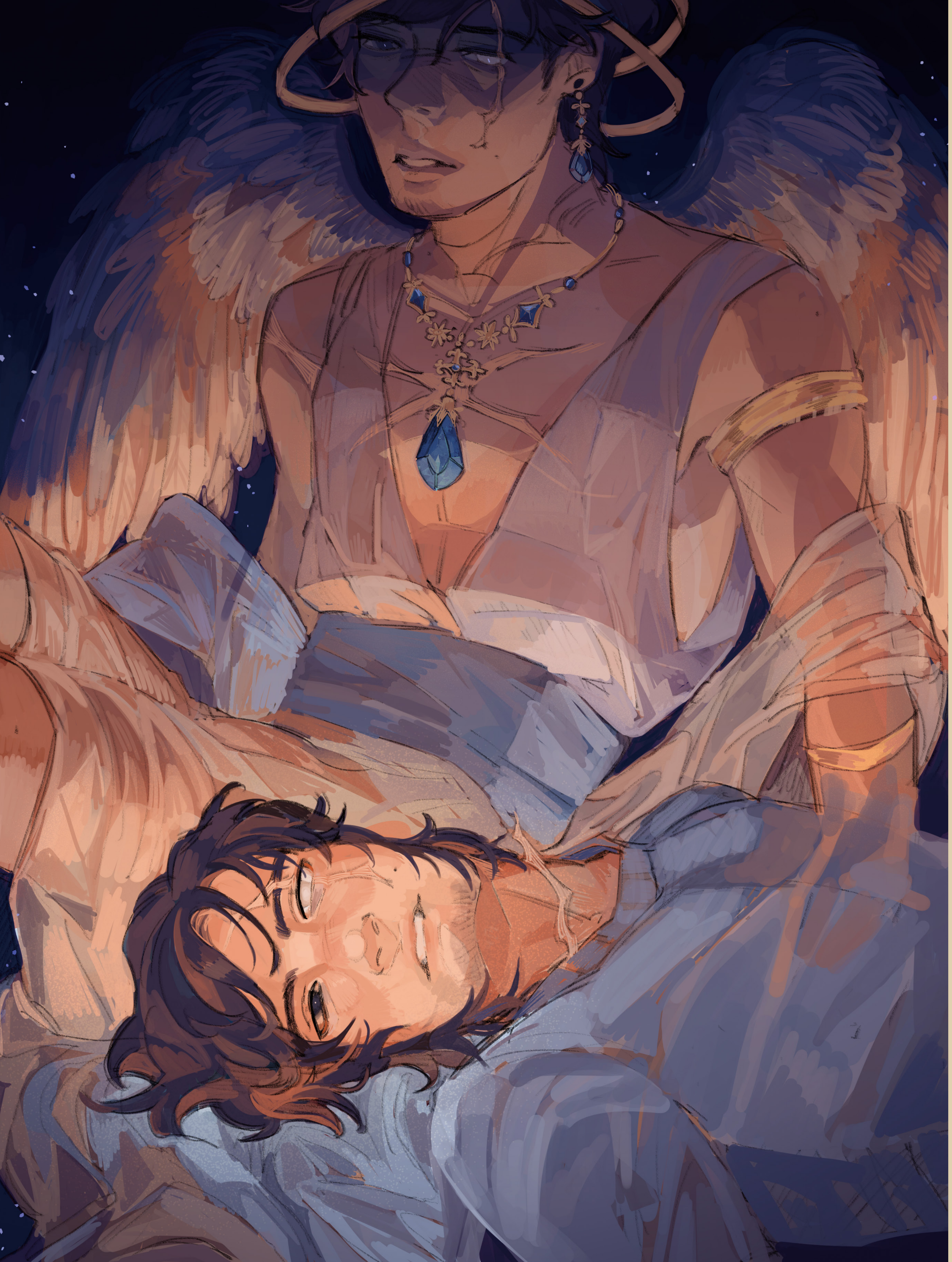
The world remained still for but a moment before the pawn lunged, dagger held tightly within his grasp, much the same from the first day chaos was caged, and aimed to kill the god. It did not cut flesh at first, cracking the fragile mask of godhood, aiming to break. After, the god would be felled, blade slicing through flesh, much the same as the first day chaos was caged, as if the god were merely chaos made divine.

The god, the admin, *Dream* was left to die by the pawn. He stumbled his way down a wooden path, a familiar way home, drawn by the last desperate claws of humanity gripped around his throat. Fingers fought to stem the flow of blood, short breaths fighting their way out despite the dead, grasping hands of a long-forgotten terror rising their way from the depth of the void, tendrils of limbo grasping at him as if it were his time. Yet they were not gentle guides, pulling a soul to the land beyond, rather they were primed to tear apart the seams that made one whole until there was nothing left of the man; a false god with the power to persist torn away.

Dream reached the first place he called home, the blurry forms of the first two people he called home within bare reach, terrified eyes no longer hidden by the mask of godhood, porcelain forgotten on wooden floors. He reached for them, locking eyes with that of his friend, and with that of his brother, as his life went dark, as the godhood was broken and a life snuffed finally. Dream died with those he cared for barely within reach, pushed away by his own pursuit of godhood, his denial of humanity, only to reach for it within his final moments as if attachment were the allowance of dead men. As if death would fix the fracture he created between them for divinity.

For the god was simply a man in pursuit of power. Gods do not know the pursuit of power, for they were power, and only mankind knows the thirst for it.

It was far too late for Dream to be human again.



The Night the Sun Was Still

HE DIDN'T EXIST; until he did.

There was no transition between nothing and everything. There was no moment when he'd first breathed. Air filled his lungs as if it'd always belonged there, as if the crevices of his body had never been the void's home. Because there was no before. As there would be no after.

There was only now.

For a brief beat, George was aware of this. As he took that first breath that didn't have a beginning, the remnants of the void inside resisted, and, for a brief beat, the sensation of a warm summer's breeze against his skin was foreign. The sensation of *skin* was foreign. Too much body, too bright, too cold, too hot, and, for a brief, brief beat, the void threatened to take him back.

By the time the puff of air left his lips, though, he was mid-step, the midday sun beating down at him as he strolled through the yellow field. There was an energy buzzing in his veins, one that was oddly familiar yet strange at the same time. One that'd pushed away the somnolence, so distant now, inviting clarity and resolution in its stead.

Resolution for... something.

It echoed at the back of his head, far, on the tip of his tongue, but the sun was hot and the breeze was cool and it was too much effort to listen for it.

It was too much effort to remember why he was at this place to begin with.

The meadow stretched far. It rolled over the hills for miles and miles, meeting the sky at the end of infinity. The distance was more of a concept, really. A decorative piece in this otherwise barren field. There was a purpose in George's mind as he headed in a direction; however, like the distance, it was a notion more than anything. Everything here was a notion more than anything. Something had to keep this place alive.

Distantly, it occurred to George his skin wasn't getting hotter. He looked up. The sun was stuck.

Huh.

He continued going.

Hours passed, or seconds, and George got tired. The purpose of his destination refused to surface and the meadow continued rolling and George got tired.

He stopped and sat down on the yellow grass.

An emotion was meant to be there. Prickly and hot. He couldn't find the word for it. It tingled at the edges of his senses, yet not enough to latch on. As if trying to recount a dream right after waking up.

"Hey."

The voice didn't startle George, though it felt like it should have. He glanced up. The sun was too bright, obscuring his face, and George had to shield his eyes from it, squinting.

"You're gonna get burnt if you just sit in the sun like that," Dream said. George could imagine him wearing a smile. The sun was too bright.

"Get an umbrella or something for me, then, idiot," he huffed.

"What? Where am I gonna get an umbrella?"

"I don't know, look for one?"

"That's dumb. Just go into the shade."

"There's no shade around, Dream."

"Yeah, there is? Right over there," he said, gesturing to the side. George followed his line of sight. Not too far in the direction where Dream pointed stood a large, lone oak tree.

Huh.

"Huh. I didn't see it."

"Obviously. You didn't look around."

George hummed. The sun wasn't that hot. But maybe the shade would be nice, too. He didn't know. Dream knew better, anyway.

Dream could always see more.

Slowly, he stood up. Dream's face was still too much in the sun. Too bright.

George imagined he was smiling.

He started walking towards the oak tree. A few paces later, he turned around. Dream hadn't moved.

George frowned. "Well? Are you coming or not?"

"Do you want me to?"

George stared at him in silence. A beat. Two beats. He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't care."

Prickly and hot tingled at the edges of his senses.

The words kept echoing through the open field.

Dream sighed, or maybe it was the wind, and stepped towards George. The meadow quieted and George turned back to the tree.

Dream had been right. The shade was nicer. George leaned against the trunk, legs crossed on the ground, and tilted his head up to look at the leaves. They were so thick they blocked out the sun. Maybe now that it wasn't being watched, the sun would start to move.

The ground beneath his feet was damp. Not like after rain—too gentle. Morning dew, perhaps.

He glanced up at the horizon.

Right. It was dawn.

The yells and the laughter bouncing off of the surface of the lake were far too loud for the hour yet they filled the crevices of his body as if it'd been carved out for them. Soothing. Familiar. Comforting.

His eyes were drawn to the ruckus up front, to the islet connected to shore by a shabby, hastily-built wooden bridge. Foundations for a house already stood there and it seemed like Dream and Sapnap were in the middle of arguing about the color of the walls. Not a conversation George had much to offer in. Not that he ever did when it came to building.

Even if their chosen location for a base was… rather interesting.

Distantly, he remembered the islet, too, was built by them. He'd never asked about how they'd managed that but now curiosity suddenly gnawed at him. George imagined a giant chicken leg sprouting from the depths, remnants of some millenia-old monster, which would have delighted Dream to no end. It no doubt would have seemed like the perfect spot for their base to him.

Awfully amused by the idea, George walked onto the bridge and knelt down, getting his head as close to the water as possible. It was clear enough to see a good distance in, and so George searched what hid underneath their little islet.

A giant chicken leg sprouted from the depths, supporting the foundation on which Dream and Sapnap were quarreling.

George blinked, then pulled himself away.

Huh.

"George! You agree with me, right?!"

"Why would he agree with *you*?" Dream questioned. As if the possibility genuinely confused him.

An odd sensation bubbled underneath his skin. One that made George want to disagree with Dream out of principle. Just to hear him sputter in disbelief. Just to see him pull that mock-hurt face.

The image, too, left him awfully amused.

"Because he knows I have actual taste, unlike you!"

"You call that— that—having *taste*?"

George stood up and glanced over to the two of them, trying to make out what colors they were arguing about.

He'd never cared for them.

He'd imagine Dream liked green, though.

Sapnap red, maybe.

And yet, the two swatches in their hands were… of nothing.

Distant ire scratched beneath his skin for a breath.

"You're both idiots," he said, finally, looking away. "I don't care."

Dream huffed, though by the time it reached George, it'd turned to laughter. "That's what you always say, George."

He shrugged. Maybe. It seemed easy.

"C'mon, come over here and just pick something."

Both Dream and Sapnap were staring at him. Quiet.

The wind had quieted, the sun had slowed. And George let them continue looking at him. Waiting for him. They'd wait, and wait, and wait, and the sun would never go again, and George could stand, and stand, and stand, and nothing would ever change.

And he stood, until his legs got tired.

In the end, the walls were painted yellow.

* * *

He slept little those days.

* * *

Sometimes, it was night, the fields illuminated by gentle moonlight. Sometimes, he would die, an arrow lodged in his throat, and then Dream would be chastising him, telling him to be more careful. A bit more to the left, and an arrow would have lodged into his throat, he would say. George would glance up, at the starry sky, and the moon would have slunk a bit lower.

He'd let himself huff, then. Dream would ask what was so funny, and he'd say *'your face'*.

Dream would scrunch it up, and George would genuinely laugh.

It was never painful. Not the blunted blades, not the sharp teeth, not the scorching flames. They didn't have time to be. Dream would be pulling him away, he would be standing in their way, he would be yanking him up from any ledge. It never hurt him, either. They didn't have the right to.

And sometimes, George would stare at the incoming arrows and not move. Just because. Just to see if this time it would be any different.

It never got tiring. Never boring. George didn't think it ever could.

He didn't have to do any of this, he knew. He could just ask for Dream to look at him. To be beside him. But it was nice to know he didn't have to. That he just *was*.

And so, he didn't feel too bad when he wouldn't avoid a swing of a sword and Dream would scold him for his carelessness. He'd only roll his eyes. *'I'm fine, aren't I?'*

'Only because I'd been near,' Dream would scoff. *'What if I wasn't?'*

'I don't know. But you were, so who cares.'

You were.

You were.

You were.

Sapnap was bandaging his hand. Calling him stupid. George was staring at the gaping wound. At the bright, bright liquid, trickling down, soaking through the white fabric.

It wasn't painful. Perhaps because it didn't have time yet to become.

George stayed quiet. Let Sapnap berate him. He looked up, through the roof of their house, up to the stars.

The moon was still going. And going. And going.

* * *

He let himself sleep in a bit more.

* * *

"Stop that."

Dream looked up at him. Or, George thought he did.

"I'm not doing anything."

George scowled. "You think I'm an idiot?"

A sigh. "When did I say that?" It sounded tired.

"You don't have to. It's the way you look at me. I can tell what you're thinking."

"And what am I thinking, George?"

George wanted him to frown. To roll his eyes, maybe.

He couldn't find them.

"You're... You're thinking I'm annoying. Am I right? Tell me I'm right."

"Well, you're acting pretty annoying, so, I don't know."

This time, it didn't sound like much of anything.

"Told you I knew what you were thinking."

He wanted it to sound something other than biting. It didn't.

"I guess you did."

Stop that.

Stop that.

Stop that.

"I'm not doing anything."

George clenched his fists. He wished blood would pool in his palm. He wished pain would spike.

It didn't.

He only realized he was walking away when his arm was grasped. He froze.

"George... C'mon."

It was quiet. Soft.

"Can we not fight today?"

George glanced at him over his shoulder.

"I don't know, can we?" he parroted. Unfair. He was being unfair. He knew it.

"Please." The hold on his arm weakened. "I'm tired."

He still couldn't find his eyes. Maybe that was good. Maybe he'd concede if he could.

George tore out of his grasp. "Go sleep, then. Wherever it is that you sleep these days. I'll turn your room into an aquarium and raise sharks there. What do you think about that, Dream? Would you like it? I'll flood it, Dream. Don't think I won't."

Dream let his arm drop.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Do whatever you want, George."

His eyes stung and his throat stung and everything fucking *stung*.

"I'll flood it, I swear I will. And you won't have a room anymore. It'll be the sharks'. I swear I'll do it, Dream, I swear I will."

His voice had grown rough by the time he realized he'd been repeating it to the wind and nothing else.

* * *

He ignored the knocks. They would go away eventually.

* * *

It was too loud. The voices echoed through the entire valley, through the forests and the hills, inside George's head. He tried putting his hands over his ears. They didn't quiet. So, he dropped them.

Perhaps he should seek them out. Perhaps then they'd still. What right did they have, anyway, to cause such a ruckus in the middle of the day? What right did they have to be so noisy, so distracting?

He didn't recognize any of the voices. They were all— No, no, that wasn't right. He did. A few, nothing more than a couple, nothing more that he'd care about, but one cut through the rest, and the indignation in his chest, simmering at a low thrum until then, flailed. He should turn away. He should head in the other direction. They weren't calling for him, so he had no business with them. Yet his legs were carrying him towards the sound before he'd realized.

Maybe he was mistaken. Maybe it was something else. Maybe it was just too late, and Dream was asleep, and that was why he wasn't—he wasn't—

But no matter how much he walked, the voices didn't grow louder. No one showed around the hill, through the trees, over the river.

Where were they? Where were they all? Why wasn't he getting any closer?

Why did he care?

He slowed to a stop. Let his shoulders slump and a huff leave his lips. All this walking tired him. He couldn't be bothered anymore.

Let them yell. Let them scream. He didn't care. He didn't. He wouldn't.

He brought his palm up and traced the smooth skin there. After a beat, he dropped it and let his eyes glide over the horizon, once, twice, before he turned around, back the way he'd come.

Let them tear their throats out for all he cared.

* * *

It was getting difficult to wake.

* * *

"George."

He twirled around, grinning. A lightness in his bones had settled at the sight and he couldn't help laughing. On such a pretty day, too. Not a cloud in sight. Not a person in sight, too. This time, though, this time he'd meant it.

"Dream," he greeted back, and he knew it wasn't right. Dream didn't sound like that. Dream didn't call his name like that. And George... smiled at that. "How did you get here?"

He'd meant it as a tease, but Dream didn't laugh.

He didn't have a mouth, George realized with wry amusement.

Dream was quiet for too long. "I'd heard you'd woken up. I didn't believe it."

George frowned at him. "I don't know what you're talking about, Dream." After a beat, he turned his head to the side and waved it off. "Actually, whatever. Now that you're here, come help me out."

He'd just started hacking at a statue of a grotesque duck that had sprung up one day and blocked his view of the looming, dark building in the distance. He liked his spot on this little hill, so this was quite inconvenient. The statue wasn't budging, though, and frustration had begun building under his skin. But Dream was here now, so it was okay. He would help. He'd move the statue and George could continue looking at that looming, dark building in the distance.

The idea that he wouldn't be able to irked him.

Finally, Dream moved. Slowly, he glided over to George's side.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

George rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to wreck this statue, idiot. Duh."

Dream turned to the looming, dark building behind it, then back to George.

"Why?"

"What does it matter?" George responded. That familiar annoyance sparked. “Just help me already.”

Dream wouldn’t question. Dream would just help.

Would he?

He would.

“Help me, Dream.”

For a second longer, he stared at George with his too many eyes before he put his too many hands on the statue and moved. Effortlessly, it tumbled over and down the hill. George grinned in self-satisfaction.

See? He would.

“George,” he said again.

His tone was strange. Unease bubbled somewhere in George’s chest. He ignored it.

“Let’s go do something else,” George said, turning back towards the path. “Maybe there are other stupid statues around to destroy.”

Stupid statues. Stupid houses. Stupid paths.

Built without care whether they even belonged here. Whether they were even allowed to belong here.

All the while, rubble laid at the bottom of the small lake. All the while the walls in the house on the islet weren’t yellow anymore.

Perhaps he should demolish that next. Lay such waste no walls could even stand in their place again.

Flood it with so many sharks.

Dream followed him, his movement silent. “How did you wake up?”

“I still don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. I’ve always been awake.”

It didn’t sound like a lie. It didn’t sound like the truth, either. He wasn’t sure what he was saying.

“Where?”

“Here, obviously.”

“And how long has ‘here’ existed?”

George threw him an irritated look. “What do you mean, how long? What’s up with all these dumb questions? Why are you being so weird?”

They stopped, then, facing each other. Dream had always been taller, but now it felt unbearably so.

“You’re still…” Dream started, trailing off in thought. A moment later, he nodded, as if deciding on something. “Okay, George, what do you want to do?”

“That’s better. We’re going to smash in some windows. Do you have any rocks on you?”

By the time the sun set, glass of all colors littered the winding paths. There was no end to Dream’s sleeves and the rocks that hid within. Of course there weren’t. George expected there not to be.

Dream didn’t bring up his weird questions again. The unease didn’t settle, though.

He tried to ignore it.

* * *

Someone was shaking him. He was so tired. Couldn’t they leave him alone?

* * *

The sky was dyed red. Which was odd, considering George couldn’t see red. And yet, he knew. Perhaps because it resembled blood.

That was a bit morbid.

George brought his sword up and lined its edge against the horizon. Yeah, that was the same color.

He hummed in mild curiosity, letting his arm drop. He didn't really like red. Yet he couldn't make himself mind it now.

"You shouldn't be here."

George didn't turn around, though he did huff. "And where should I be, then?"

When he didn't get an answer, he glanced over his shoulder. There was no more green to be seen. Only red. So much red. That couldn't have been all his, right?

Somewhere, at the back of his head, George found himself wishing, sickly, that it was.

"And where should I be, then, Dream?" he asked again, turning to him fully. "Or, wait, that's the wrong question. It's about where I should have been, right? That's what you actually wanted to ask." He let the tip of his sword clunk against the stone path. "As if that matters now."

"As if it *ever* mattered to you!" Dream suddenly snapped, the sound so loud the sky trembled. The force behind his words pushed George back a couple of steps, breath getting stuck in his throat. "As if that was something you ever cared about."

Maybe it wasn't the sky trembling. George bit down on his lip, hard, willing it to still.

"What would you know?" he bristled. "You never asked."

"I didn't think I'd have to!" Dream threw his hands out. One of them was wrapped tightly around the handle of his axe. George followed its arc with his eyes. "I thought, after everything, it was a given. But not with you, right? Nothing's ever a given with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You do what you want, and you expect everyone to just go along. And I would! And I did! And maybe I thought that meant something to you! But god forbid you'd get *inconvenienced*," he bit the word out like a curse. "You never cared, George, you never cared about anyone, and you never cared about me, so don't pretend like you did and don't act like a goddamn victim when you were never one."

George wasn't listening to half the things coming out of Dream's mouth. It was all spite, anger, hate, a slew of maliciousness that George drank up. He welcomed every bit of resentment because then his own could grow. Because then he could throw it back at something, instead of letting it corrode him.

He tasted red.

"Then that's how it is," George spoke coolly. "I never cared just as you didn't. We can both stop pretending."

George wasn't listening to the things coming out of his mouth, either. He just wanted to speak, he just wanted to bite. He just wanted to hurt.

Dream laughed—an awful, ghastly sort of sound. George tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword.

"Maybe you're right, George," Dream finally said, still chuckling. It grated at George enough to draw blood. "But it's your fault for falling for it."

Fleetingly, he questioned his own sanity. Was any of this making any sense?

He couldn't wonder for long. A fresh wave of anger washed it all away.

"Kill me, then, Dream. Prove it."

Not a second later their blades clashed. There was something to be said about Dream now being closer to him than he'd been in forever, but George couldn't be bothered to figure out what. He only pushed back, returning the blows with equal ferocity. Dream had always been better than him, but now he was being reckless. Uncoordinated. Left too many openings. It would have been easy, it would have been too easy to use them. It would have been so stupidly easy to end it as quickly as it had begun.

And yet, it was George who tripped over a piece of rubble. It was him who laid on the red path, then, where he could do nothing but watch that axe arc, arc before, finally, it swung down.

George hadn't closed his eyes. He wished to see it, for himself, the blade crack his skull open. So that it'd never dare piece itself together again and no one could blame George for it. But it never came. With a deafening thud, it lodged itself next to his head, barely missing his ear.

There was no relief to grasp at. Frustration choked him—even here, even now, when George willed him to, when George commanded him to, Dream wouldn't bring his stupid axe to his stupid head. What right did he have to refuse? What right did he have to even *think*—

Frustration quickly gave way to blooming horror, however, as he realized his own sword hadn't had any such reservations. As Dream had struck down, he'd gotten too close. George hadn't thought. He hadn't thought before bringing his blade up, impaling Dream through the middle of his chest. It was on instinct, anyone would have, he hadn't—he wasn't—this didn't—

Slowly, Dream let go of the handle of his axe. He let his body slide farther down the blade until he could place his palms on the ground on either side of George's head. George wanted to pull the sword away, get it out of him, but the hilt of it was now stuck between the two of them. As if that meant anything. George knew he wouldn't have been able to move, anyway. He could only stare up, breath frozen between his lips, unsure of what he was looking at anymore.

Dream moved his mouth, yet no sound escaped it. With a start, George realized he could see his face. His ashen skin. His dull eyes. His dirtied and tousled hair, far too long, cascading around him like a veil. A droplet landed on George's cheek. For a hysterical moment, he'd thought Dream had started crying. But no. It was the red dripping through his lips.

"What?" George whispered, a punched-out sort of thing.

The silent words slowed to a stop. For a brief, horribly brief second, everything was still. And then, his body slumped on top of George's.

It wasn't as heavy as he'd expected. It would have been easy to toss him aside. Far too easy. And so George laid there, pretending that he was being crushed. It was almost endearing, the way Dream's body covered his own, a macabre sort of embrace.

The hilt trapped between them was digging into George's abdomen. He wondered how long it would take for it to dig all the way through.

George stared up at the red, red sky, and tried to understand what Dream had been saying. It had to be something simple. A few words, no more. Yet nothing came to mind. No matter how much he replayed the movements, it was all incoherent. He couldn't understand.

Perhaps there was nothing to understand. Perhaps George had only imagined it.

"Have you had enough?"

George strained his neck up. Dream was looking down at him. The one with too many eyes.

"Why?"

Dream heaved a sigh. "You can't lie there forever." A pause. "C'mon, George. Get up."

"I'm too tired. Leave me alone."

"You want to sleep again?"

George considered that.

"No."

"Then get up."

"I can't. I'm crushed."

Dream moved around to stand in front of him. "There's nothing there,

George.”

That couldn’t be right.

He looked down. Huh. There really wasn’t.

“...I still can’t be bothered.”

Perhaps if he didn’t move, nothing would change.

Dream hummed before shrugging. “Suit yourself.”

And with that, he started walking away. Alarmed, George sat up. “Wait.”

He stopped. “What is it?”

“I... I don’t understand. Is this a nightmare?”

A few moments passed. Then a couple more. Finally, Dream moved back to his side and crouched down to his eye level.

“Do you want it to be?”

“What does it matter what I want?” George asked, oddly quiet.

“Let’s say it does. What is it that you want? Truly, George?”

He glanced around the destruction spanning into the horizon. At all the red. It was oddly comforting.

“I don’t want to fall asleep again,” he said, finally. “I’m tired.”

Dream grasped George’s chin, feather-light, and turned his head back to him.

“I can make that happen,” he said. “But George...” And this time, his name sounded like his own. “You’ll never be able to wake up, either. You’ll make this world your own, and you’ll impart it on others, but you’ll never be able to leave. Is that what you want?”

He didn’t care. He truly... didn’t care.

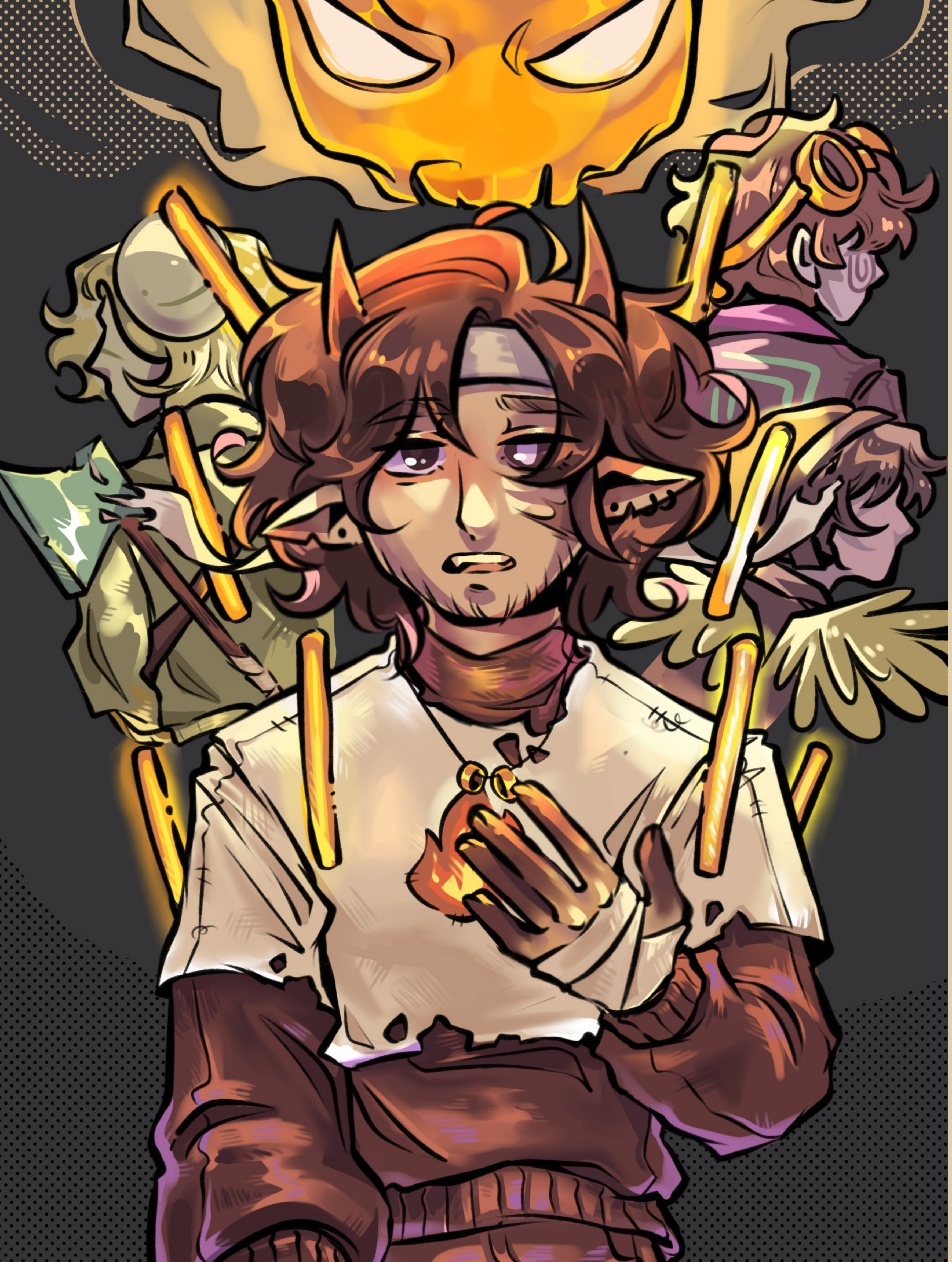
“So be it, then.”

Not waking up again didn’t sound too horrible.

Not when, at least here, he knew it was only a nightmare.

* * *

And so, he never did.



Five Steps to Stoke a Fire

I. SPARK THE TINDER

Sapnap's first memory was of heat. Blazing heat. The way it burned his skin and the way embers felt trickling down his throat and the way the tears evaporated off his cheeks. He screamed but he was a child in the Nether. No one came for him.

Sapnap cried in his crib until the blaze rods resting next to him began to lose their smolder. Until all the fire suffused into his veins and left him to rise from the ashes himself.

He thought he was human once but that past was lost to him. Sapnap's family was one of the rare human ones in the Nether. But whatever happened that day, it changed him.

It should have killed him. Instead Sapnap became something… else. Something other than human. Something less than human.

(The idea that he could ever be more, that he could even be equal to a real human had been beaten out of him a long time ago.)

It took his family a while to realize fully what had happened. He was injured by the blaze rods, burned, but he had ultimately escaped less hurt than he should have. The scalding heat should have killed him. At the time, they thought he was just lucky and that the burns across his cheek and forehead would eventually fade.

Instead Sapnap left the white bandage wrapped around his head for months longer than expected. It wasn't until his mother walked in on his changing that his parents saw him for what he truly was.

Magma cracks fractured his smooth skin. His fingertips, usually hidden under gloves, were still stained soot black. A tail tipped in eternal flame snaked around his leg. The fire hadn't burned anything yet, not until his mother screamed and Sapnap felt his fear ignite.

That was the first time Sapnap realized how dangerous he was. When he accidentally set his room on fire. When his parents ran from the burning house. When he got a glimpse of himself in the mirror and saw red irises and lava crackling out from under his eyes and teeth sharpened in fangs and so much black and red and orange and so much fire.

He walked out of the house unscathed, but his parents didn't take him back. Blazes are some of the most dangerous creatures of the Nether, with no thought other than to burn and destroy. How could they accept a son who had become what they hated?

Part mob. Part monster.

In all his years wandering alone through the Nether, learning how to fend for himself, Sapnap never learned where the blaze rods came from. His family lived in the Nether, sure, but far from any bastions. No human in their right mind would make their home that close to mobs.

Blaze rods were a tricky thing regardless. Supposedly valuable, but no one knew their true use. They were beyond rare because of how hard they were to obtain. Anyone who did manage to get some usually risked their life.

How blaze rods ended up in Sapnap's crib was a mystery. A horrible, life changing, mutilating mystery.

Sapnap was nine when he found the portal.

He stumbled through it and for the first time, he saw the sky. Boundless and beautiful and so so blue. He didn't even know that color existed beyond the occasional sapphire gems piglins kept. He thought the world existed in shades of red and orange and fire. That was all he'd ever known. Fire and how it burns.

He wondered if it would be obvious how out of place he was in this world. If the real humans would know just by looking at him that he didn't belong.

As he glanced around though, he didn't see another soul. The portal wasn't protected. There was no one to tell Sapnap to go back to hell, not yet. Sapnap didn't want to stick around and wait for someone to find him so he fled, as fast and as quietly as he could.

And he didn't stop. He never stopped.

He never found his way back to that portal. And that's just fine by him.

II. Light the Kindling

Sapnap was nineteen when he took on a bounty that changed his life. The Overworld had been kind to him but the people had not. The land was bountiful, more resources and vitality than the Nether could dream to compete with, but Sapnap was still so lonely. He took on the bounty in hopes that maybe it would finally earn him enough respect that he could bargain his way to friends.

In the Nether, friendship was a foreign concept. There's family, there's trading, and there's death. Bonds were forged at birth in blood or in wealth. Sapnap could at least benefit from one of those by being a hunter.

He grabbed the flier for the largest bounty he saw in the village tavern and brought it back to his camp to read. The realization set in with a sick feeling rising in his stomach.

The bounty was for another boy his age.

It didn't say exactly what he's wanted for, only that he's a danger to society. It implied he might be less than human but didn't provide any proof.

Sapnap hesitated but then his eyes ticked up to the reward.

He folded up the paper and started packing his bags.

Ironically, it’s not the bounty but the hunt itself that brought Sapnap his first friend. He met George on the road. For all of the quiet apathy that most people found off-putting about George, Sapnap found it calming. George didn’t care about where Sapnap came from or why he always wore gloves and a headband even in the desert heat. He didn’t care about much of anything except hunting down the boy with the bounty on his head.

When Sapnap asked him why he became a hunter, George just shrugged.

“I never wanted to be a hunter. I just... feel like I’m supposed to find Dream,” was all he said.

Despite their companionship now, Sapnap worried what would happen when they did find Dream. Sapnap wanted the bounty. George wanted... well, it seemed like even he didn’t know what he wanted most days. Still, Sapnap was grateful for the company.

It felt like they were closer to Dream than ever before when Dream led them into an arctic region. From a distance, the snow looked beautiful, like refined diamond, a kind of clean purity that’s never seen in the Nether.

Up close though? Sapnap had never known a cold like this. No amount of layers could keep him warm. George watched him with unusually worried eyes, hazelnut and blue tracking each shiver and tremble. He even offered up his own furs as Sapnap’s chattering teeth grew louder and louder. Sapnap wasn’t proud enough to turn him down.

But it wasn’t enough.

On the next hill, they could see the flicker of a fire. Dream had to be

right there, right within reach. But Sapnap was freezing. It felt like all the fire had been sapped out of him. He was so cold that he felt almost... human.

“Come on, Sapnap. We’re almost there.” George tugged at his hand, pointing to the blip of fire. “You can make it. Don’t give up on me now.”

“I–” He couldn’t stop his teeth from chattering. “I can’t f-fight like this.”

George gave him a weird look. “We’re not gonna fight. We need to get you somewhere warm.”

Sapnap wanted to argue. Of course they’d have to fight. Did George think that Dream would just go willingly with them? Dream knew they had been hunting him. He doubted he’d take kindly to them finally catching up.

He opened his mouth but suddenly his knees locked and he–

He thought he heard George yell. He thought he saw electric green eyes whip towards them. But everything went cold and black as he tipped into the snow.

III. Fan the Flames

Sapnap woke up to the crackling of a fire and wind whistling at the entrance of a shallow cave. And two voices instead of one.

Sapnap’s eyes shot open, panic lancing through him. He let his guard down. In the Nether, that’s a death sentence. His parents left him alone for just a moment and it changed the course of his life forever. How long was he passed out for?

He struggled to sit upright and the talking stopped. He saw George first, the only familiar face he’s known in months. Then, beside him, weapons still holstered to his hips, was the boy they had been hunting.

Sapnap went to draw his own weapon, hand still shaking, but came up empty. His eyes darted over to where his ax gleamed in the firelight, carefully resting against the cave wall.

"Don't," George whispered. Sapnap paused. "Please."

Sapnap's gaze drifted to the rest of the dingy cave. To the cloaks he's resting on top of, two underneath him and one bundled under his head. To the food roasting over the fire. To the way George's fingers laced with Dream's, half hidden behind Dream's wary form.

George did warn him that he wasn't a hunter.

Outside, the snow storm still raged on. Sapnap knew the sparks in his veins couldn't take this kind of cold, not again, not until the storm cleared at least.

So he settled in. At least he wasn't not alone.

* * *

The snow fell for longer than any of them expected. They could only rely on each other for survival. When it was clear that Sapnap wasn't getting better, Dream demanded the truth and with no other choice, Sapnap admitted his true nature. Instead of leaving him in the snow, George and Dream accepted him. They helped him.

The fire was stoked, Sapnap's bed was moved closer to the flames, and his blood finally began to warm again. In thanks, Sapnap left embroidered flames along the cuffs of Dream's hoodie. Dream said he liked to collect memories that way. Sapnap's designs came out far messier than George's neatly embroidered goggles but Dream seemed to appreciate them nonetheless.

They never did end up turning in Dream. Instead, Sapnap let Dream bring him into a new world.

* * *

Somewhere down the line, things changed. Dream grew harsher.

George grew more distant. But Sapnap would never forget the first people who showed him kindness. His first real friends. They would always be brothers.

IV. Burn It All to Ashes

Sapnap was 21 when he met Quackity and Karl. For all of Karl's sweetness, it was actually Quackity who Sapnap warmed up to first. They bonded over their shared hybrid nature. Dream and George always accepted Sapnap for what he was but for the first time, Sapnap began to accept himself. A large part of that was due to Quackity, his blunt honesty and ribbing jokes helping to ease Sapnap's self-hatred until he had no choice but to see the beauty in being a hybrid that Quackity did.

(It took longer with Karl. Sapnap couldn't explain it. Karl was kind, so kind and so sweet to him, but... Karl knew him too well. They'd just met and Karl already, unexplainably, knew him too well and loved him too much. Part of Sapnap thought that this was just Karl's way, that Karl falls hard and falls easy, but it was something more than that too. It was the way Karl looked at him with guileless eyes full of expectation and joy and... pride. Satisfaction, almost.

He looked at Sapnap like he was exactly what he was supposed to be. It was love, in a way, but it still unsettled Sapnap. It was too early for Karl to know his soul like that.

Wasn't it?)

* * *

Sapnap was still in love when he saw the burns on Karl's hands. He had tried so hard to make sure he didn't hurt his lover that his heart immediately clenched in fear at the sight of long burns lancing along Karl's palm.

The burns were still shiny and raw, recent enough to ache. Sapnap realized that he's so used to seeing his lover in his favorite hoodie, sweater paws up to his knuckles, that he rarely saw this part of Karl. He didn't remember burning him but it still could be his fault. All it would take was a little misplaced annoyance, a little carelessness, and the bed the three of them share could become an inferno for Sapnap's lovers.

He'd gotten better at accepting himself with Quackity and Karl. They knew he's a blaze hybrid. He didn't hide his features from them, didn't shy away from their sweet caresses. They'd tried to convince him over and over again that he could never be a danger to them. But it's not a matter of wanting, of loving. Sapnap could hurt them even if he didn't mean to.

If Sapnap had broken the trust they placed in him... He'd never deserve their kindness again.

Karl stumbled as Sapnap grasped his wrist, cradling his hand palm up in front of him and stopping his descent to his library.

"What happened, darling?" he whispered. He turned glassy eyes to Karl's face, searching for pain and fear. "Did... did I do this to you?"

Karl's nose wrinkled. "Course not. You'd never hurt me."

"I know... I know but I... What if I didn't realize? This looks fresh." He grazed a thumb over the wound and Karl winced. "It's recent, isn't it? It hasn't healed."

"It hasn't healed," Karl agreed. His smile turned rueful. "But it's old. Almost as old as you. Besides, you'd remember if you burned me." Sapnap watched Karl's irises shift between fiery shades of orange and red, and then settle on burnt black. Unease prickles on his spine. Karl's eyes were rarely so dark, so hidden. His emotions were usually clearer, brighter, softer, and it would show in his multi-colored eyes. He didn't see black in Karl's gaze often.

Sapnap murmured, "It's hurting you though." His brow pinched together. He hated the way he heard Karl's inhales shake just the tiniest bit as Sapnap tried to gently examine the injury.

"It's worth it. It's a small price to pay for what I got to keep," Karl contended.

Sapnap almost let it pass, like most of the cryptic things Karl says, but for some reason he couldn't let this one go. Maybe it's because he's all too used to seeing burns on the people he loved. And something about the burn felt... familiar. The longer he held Karl's hand, the more Karl's knuckles trembled. He wondered if it was fear.

"I didn't do this?" he asked again. He glanced up for confirmation. Karl nodded. "Why are you shaking like this? Am... am I scaring you?" He abruptly dropped Karl's hand. "I'm so sorry. I just grabbed you, didn't I? I'm probably making it worse and–"

Karl clutched his hand to his chest, a faltering exhale falling from his lips. He was holding back either pain or fear, it's clear in the deep furrow in his forehead, but when he looked up again, he was smiling. It wavered at the corners but Karl's expression was still happy. Or maybe... grateful?

"I'm not scared of you, baby. I've never been scared of you. It just hurts sometimes when I'm near–" Karl cut himself off, and then corrected with finality, "–sometimes. That doesn't matter to me though. I've spent enough time here to know that love is greater than pain."

Sapnap knew the little of Karl's past (and present and future) that Karl had shared with him and Quackity. Karl came from somewhere else. Sometime else. Sometimes he travels and he doesn't come back the same. He knew that Karl had likely lived longer than him and Quackity combined but he still hated to think of how much suffering Karl just accepted.

Karl always danced around the truth. Sapnap wondered if this time would be any different. "What does that mean, though?" Sapnap pressed. Usually he'd let it go. They all had secrets that were all their own. But this one nagged at him. "A burn like this... I don't understand how it couldn't be my fault if you're... if you're talking about love. And pain." Karl faltered. His eyes searched the room. "Please tell me the truth," Sapnap begged.

Karl shook his head. "I just need you to trust me, Sapnap. You don't have anything to worry about. You know how much I love you," he pleaded but it just made Sapnap more certain that he's hiding something, that he's hiding some way he was hurt by Sapnap.

"I trust you. I *love* you. That's why I need to know if I'm hurting you." Sapnap felt hot tears beginning to gather, slipping down his cheek. He held his breath and prayed they wouldn't sizzle off his skin. He had to smother the embers.

"Darling, please don't cry." Karl reached out with his burned palm and cupped Sapnap's left cheek, thumbing away the tears. "Please trust me. There are some things that you don't want to know."

Sapnap trusted him. He had always trusted him.

He sighed, about to let it go, when his eyes snapped open. His hand flew up to grip Karl's, holding it against his cheek.

Holding it where Karl's burn fit perfectly over the scar on Sapnap's cheek. The wound that started it all, that made him into this creature. The scar the blaze rod left when it changed him forever.

The burns were an exact match.

Karl tried to pull away, eyes wide and scared. But this time Sapnap didn't care. He only held on tighter. His name, deep with betrayal and confusion, crawled out of Sapnap. "...Karl?"

"Sapnap– Sap, please, it's not what you think–" Karl begged. He was shaking even more now but Sapnap couldn't see how the answer could be anything else.

His family always wondered how blaze rods could have ended up in his crib.

Sapnap could picture it now. Karl stealing into his house in the middle of the night, taking a blaze rod in hand and wincing as it singed his flesh. Looking down at Sapnap, looking down at *a child*, and knowing the pain that was about to ensue. And then dropping the blaze rod into the crib anyway, right against Sapnap's cheek where it would infuse Sapnap's blood with the fire of a blaze and leave a permanent scar. Sapnap wondered if Karl even stayed to listen to the way he screamed. His first memory. His most painful memory.

Karl was there. Karl was the reason it happened.

The match was too perfect. The guilt in Karl's eyes was too telling. Sapnap already knew it was true. Karl made him like this. It left him with only one question.

"Why?"

Karl opened his mouth but hesitated, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Y-you–" he stammered. "You're not going to understand."

Indignation flared in Sapnap. He took a step back, finally dropping Karl's hand. Even now, he didn't want to accidentally hurt him if he lost control over his flames. That didn't stop him from raising his voice as he protested, "It's my life! It's my life you're playing with Karl! I don't care if I don't understand, I deserve to know."

Karl's voice wobbled on the edge of tears as he insisted, "I wasn't playing with it. I never wanted to hurt you but I– I had to."

Sapnap snapped. He felt his face grow hot as magma crackled under his skin. His tail lashed, sending plumes of smoke into the air. *"You made me into a monster!"*

"At least you're not dead!" Tears were streaming down Karl's rosy cheeks now, his eyes a dark and watery blue. His gestures were getting less and less controlled as he said, "If I didn't do that, you would have died! I– I saw it. You left to go back to that terrible place and it killed you. You slipped and it was the Nether and there was only lava below you and I... I had to watch that. I had to watch you die." Karl's hands clenched into fists. "I was never supposed to intervene but I had to. I had to! I couldn't live without you. I couldn't let that happen to you." His gaze beseeched his lover. "I did it to save you, Sapnap. So nothing like that could ever hurt you again."

Sapnap shook his head. He couldn't think past his heartbreak as he snarled, "Is that really it, Karl? You just saw a random human boy die and you changed everything for that? For me?"

"Y-yes," Karl stuttered but his eyes, white with the lie, gave him away.

Sapnap scoffed. “I know how many people you’ve seen die. That’s not enough to save me. Tell me the truth. Tell me why you went back. Tell me why you did this to me.”

“Sapnap, I...” Karl closed his eyes. “I don’t know what you want me to say. It won’t change anything. *I* won’t change anything, not again. Wouldn’t you rather be alive? Please, just... leave it.”

“No.” Sapnap was horrified to hear his own voice getting choked up because he knew. He knew already. He knew as soon as he heard Karl say *I couldn’t live without you.* But, “I need to hear you say it. I want you to admit it to my face.”

Karl sucked in a breath. Sapnap waited until finally Karl broke and whispered, “It was selfish, Sapnap. Is that what you want to hear me say? You’re right, I don’t go back for everyone but I went back for you because I love you. I knew there was a timeline where you, me and Q fell in love but if I let you stay a mortal, we never would have met. You would have died and I– I would still be alone.”

Barbs slipped from Sapnap’s lips, thirsting to draw blood. “Maybe that’s the way it was meant to be.”

All of a sudden Karl’s eyes flared red with anger. “I saved your life! Does it matter if I did it righteously or selfishly? Does it matter if it was so I could love you? So you could love me?”

Sapnap was sick with it all. The realization that Karl made him into what he was, that Karl in some way was responsible for every moment of Sapnap’s life from the moment that blaze rod was laid to rest with him. To think that all his hardships were so he could love Karl. To know that everytime he suffered because of his nature, it was so he could belong to Karl. And it was all intentional.

He couldn’t bear to be in the room with him anymore.

“It matters,” is all he said. Then he turned on his heel and left.

V. Gather the Embers and Begin Again

Karl let Sapnap read his journals. It broke Sapnap’s heart all over again.

Karl was never meant for this world but he loved it. He loved Sapnap and Quackity too. They were the taste of freedom Karl’s past never gave him. So when Karl learned that Sapnap never made it into adulthood, he took matters into his own hands.

Sapnap didn’t know if he could forgive him yet, if not for the act, at least for the lying. But he saw how badly Karl needed something, someone, to hold onto. He read about the way he was outcast from the Inbetween, about his descent into amnesia, about the guilt and joy he felt when he finally got to meet Sapnap again in this lifetime.

He knew Karl was distraught at the thought of losing him. He also knew Karl wouldn’t apologize.

Through it all, Sapnap still loved Karl. He talked about it with Quackity for hours until Quackity finally asked, voice quiet and hurt, “Do you really hate being a hybrid that much?” Sapnap stared at his lover, at his soft duck wings and the way his hands clenched, and realized all his self-hatred had reflected back on one of the people he loved the most.

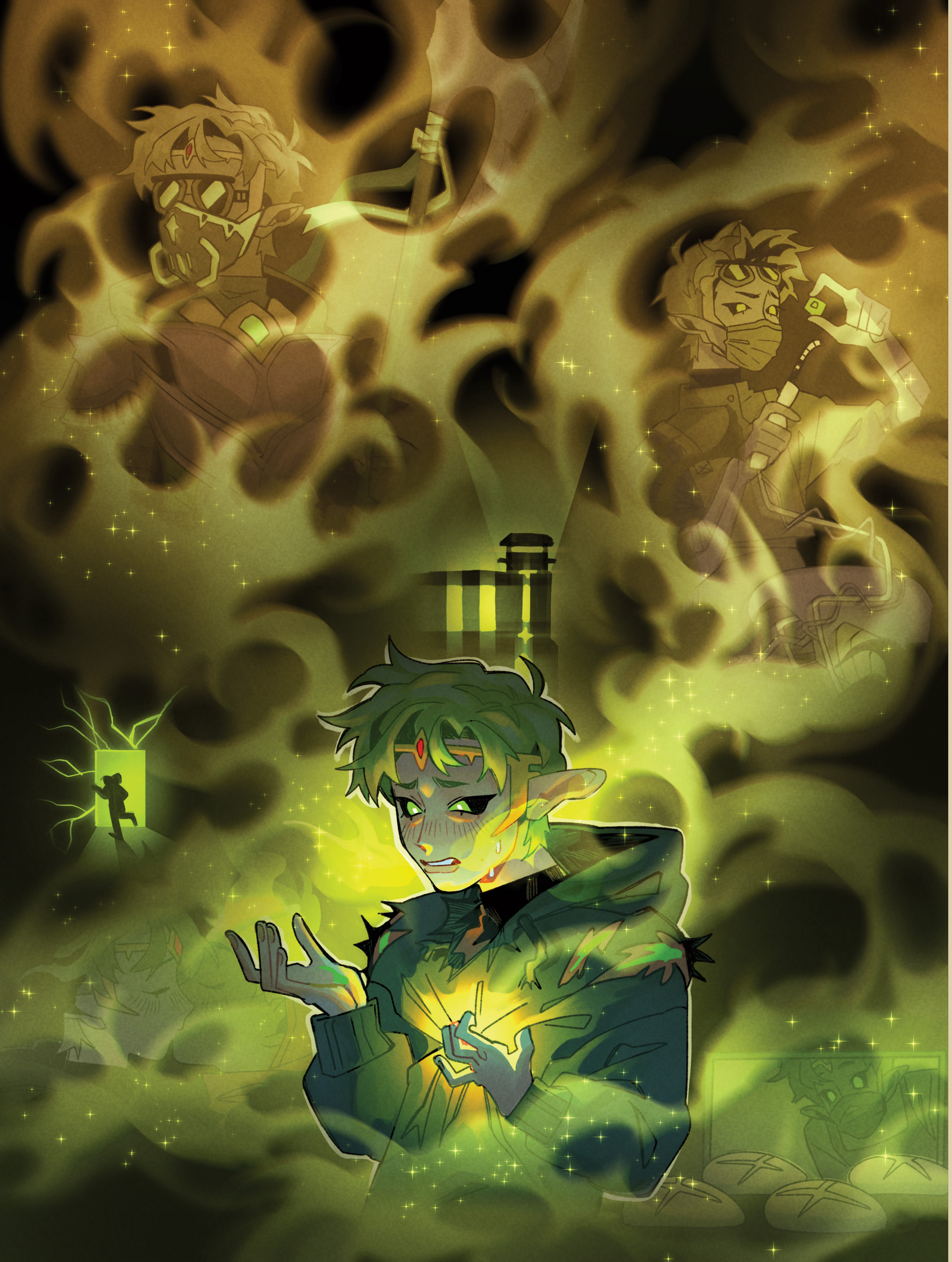
Slowly, Sapnap shook his head. “I... I don’t. I just– I spent my whole life thinking I was a monster. It was you and Karl who helped me realize that maybe I was more than that. But Karl...” Sapnap blinked, holding back the heat of tears. “Of course he didn’t think I was a monster. He made me like this. He would rather have me like this than who I was supposed to be. He couldn’t be happy with who I was because I left him too soon so he– he did this to me.”

“You’re not a monster, Sapnap. Whatever Karl did doesn’t change that. You’re a good person. You’re brave. You’re strong. And you deserve to feel angry and betrayed or however else you feel.” Quackity’s voice strengthened with conviction. “I just don’t want you to feel like that means you also have to feel like less of a person again. Because you’re not and you never have been.”

Sapnap sighed. He just felt so heavy and tired, his heart worn and cold. “I don’t want to feel like that again either. But it’s like… It’s like I owe him the rest of my life, even though I never asked for this. I left my home because of him. I lost my family because of him. I can’t be grateful for that.”

“I don’t think he needs you to be grateful. I think he just wants to love you,” Quackity whispered, taking Sapnap’s hand in his. “But is that enough for you?”

Sapnap couldn’t answer that now but maybe he would be able to eventually. Sapnap’s heart may have broken but like a phoenix, through fire it would be born again. The future was on their side. This time, at least.



Vessels & Prisons

THE NATURE OF a creeper was to die. Its sole purpose was to explode and take something else down with it.

But Sam was not a creeper. At least not entirely.

Even Wardens have childhoods, even if one can no longer see it behind the mask. Sam didn't know his childhood was strange, he didn't know any other way. There were rules to keep them safe. Don't go out at night without armor, make sure you know which way home is, and keep your emotions in check. *Tantrums* were the primary cause of their infant mortality rate.

Sam had been lucky.

He spent many years in a state of general, careful contentment. He liked being a happy-go-lucky kind of man, one without problems or complications or anger. If anger or hurt threatened to rise, he perfected the art of becoming cold. Any emotions that pushed him too close, enough that he could taste the sharp, bitterness of gunpowder, he focused. He worked with redstone until he knew it better than he knew himself. *That* became what kept him safe. The mechanics of redstone, the electrical pulses that kept his body running, he didn't have to *just* be a machine. He could still be alive. He just had to keep track of how long of a fuse he had left, the end of which he *wouldn't* be alive anymore.

When there is an explosion inside your heart, you learn not to go near it.

It worked for over twenty years.

The breaking point, the change of nature, of what parts of himself he could allow to exist, it was not anger or grief or any sort of hurt which changed him.

Ponk had set his heart on fire in a different sort of way.

The first time they became unmasked around one another, Sam found himself unmasked in a different way, one in which Ponk's gentle words of *handsome* and *stupid* uttered affectionately in the same breath could not spare him.

It was meant to be something kind, something gentle and romantic and harmless. Ponk had stood on their tiptoes, until their noses almost touched, and Sam had leaned in close, finally able to see that easy smile for himself, a hand cradling their face. He could not remember a time where this kind of joy, this kind of adoration had captivated him, unmasked and devoted.

Ponk was made for gentler things than him.

Soon Sam would be reminded of this.

For the first time in many years, Sam had tasted gunpowder. He'd felt the heat of smoke curling in his mouth before coming free between his lips and Ponk's. It was not pain, it was love that pushed him too close to the edge for the first time in so long.

Ponk had stared at him, confused, hurt, when he had pulled away sharply. "Sam?"

Sam hadn't paused for another moment. He had fled, not knowing if he had enough time to turn back, but utterly set on not bringing Ponk down with him. If a creeper's nature was to destroy, Sam would ensure he would be the only wreckage. That realization alone, that cruel truth being that even elation, vibrant love and joy, can make that feeling grow, that had sent him spiraling far worse, far deeper toward burning himself up. He could not escape his own nature, that *hiss* had begun to hum in his ears and Sam had found somewhere to hide, to choke back smoke alongside his love and his fear. He had warded off an explosion by clinging to every last nerve, shutting it all down until his love for Ponk, his fear for his life and theirs, it became muted, like he drained the oxygen from within himself to suffocate a lit fuse.

He had buried everything, and with it he'd buried the thought that maybe his existence was a cursed one.

Ponk had accepted apologies with ease. They knew Sam had

something more lurking underneath the surface. They did not need to taste gunpowder on his lips to know that, and they would love him anyway. Sam would try to find a way to love them in turn. Sam had to condemn himself to the fact that he cannot feel, not strongly, not freely. But he wanted to *live*.

Sam was, first and foremost, an engineer.

As always, he had found answers and sanctuary in a machine.

He buried himself in a tomb wherein he would build his own resurrection. Metal bones, redstone for blood, and a vessel came to be. The perfect being. No complications of mortal flesh or a pounding heart or gunpowder in his veins. This being would be strong, it would be unbreakable. He wanted it to be soft too. To be kind. He wanted that for himself.

He need only extract his own soul, to cut his being in half, splitting mind and body, but perhaps some things were not made to be severed, some bodies could not be occupied.

Sam knew what he then meddled with was beyond science or reason or divine logic, he knew the dangers, the magic of this world that ran so much deeper than an enchanted trident or a lit portal, but at the same time, those roots had come from somewhere. He wanted to try. Not only for his hopes of a future, a life spent less contained, but just to see if he *could*. Sam could design a machine, he would trick the very universe, make it not realize that his body had gone to one plane and his mind had stayed in another.

Sam placed a curse of binding upon himself. He did not trust himself to not drift away permanently, but this way his soul would remain connected to his body whether he wanted it to be or not. Lapis Lazuli embedded underneath his skin, carefully drawn runes needled onto his left arm. It had been the easiest place for him to reach and work with precision. Sam would remain rooted in his body. That part was essential. If he had ended up drifting, utterly unattached... maybe there were worse things to become than an explosion. Still, there were tricks, there were ways around the self and the soul which he was just clever enough– just *desperate* enough– to try.

Sam would place the vessel in one portal, directly across from another. It would go through to the other side just as he did and they would link up in the same place. One vessel would remain empty, save for a tenuous link, the other would not. Becoming a *Spectator* of the world, he knew *of* it. He only knew of it in theory. In practice, that was where things would grow more dangerous. It was a state beyond life or godhood. He would be nothing, a consciousness able to gaze into the earth itself, but he would do so with the intent of tying himself back down to something other than his own body.

Sam wanted to be a man, a mortal being without divine power or anything beyond what he knew himself to be, he wanted to be something other than a timebomb. He never asked to play god, but the universe would not reward him for his efforts either way.

Sam was an organic being.

He felt at home amongst machines and mechanisms, but he is still something so much more complex than metal. Nerves and sinew, blood which cannot be replaced by redstone, but it *almost* worked.

The world around him bent and warped out of shape, as he and the vessel passed over to the Nether as one.

And the outcome was *wrong*. Not quite agony, but perhaps something worse. He had found a way to liberate himself of nerve endings and a pulse. His consciousness remained, his limbs reacted to his will– limbs too strong, too unbreakable– but he was not alive here.

But, a light at the end of a dark, unfeeling tunnel, he knew his body remained, empty, weak, but *there*, waiting for him. He had fled toward it like a moth to a flame.

Lightning to a lightning rod.

Sam's return to his own mortal body was a violent one.

He had known the risks, but the instant taste of smoke curling in lungs he had already forgotten how to fill with air and Sam thought he was dying just for daring to be alive again.

You will not die. You cannot die. You want to live.

You want to feel again.

A mantra which helped him calm his soul until he felt so little that the fires behind his eyes were suffocated. For now. Sam had dragged that old vessel back. He cannot live out of metal alone, but maybe the machine would have its uses. One day he would give it a mechanical brain, one designed with its creator's wishes in mind– *protect, build, be gentle,* those wishes would live on longer in that machine than they would in him, but not yet. First he needed more flesh.

Sam felt no kinship to creepers. They were hollow things with tiny, bitter intentions. They did not recognize him as one of them and he did not recognize them in turn. Sam learned how to cut their hearts out before they could reach him, with the help of a few cats.

Sam cut their hearts out and kept what remained and did not wonder what this said about his own anatomy. It didn't matter. He took what remained and he began to create. Nothing in this new vessel would make an explosion. Its bones would have to still come from creepers, but creepers drained of their spark.

He also knew what other flesh and matter he needed to be reborn into. Sam's flesh did not melt off as it one day would at the hands of an infection, a parasitic egg set on eating him alive, instead Sam cut away from himself with surgical precision. A health potion onto the hollow divots left behind, like water washing away old laid redstone lines. He was not a god. Every body had a bloody cost, a mere man attempting to brush against the divine, all because he wanted to be a little more human. Sam wouldn't call himself a botanist, that was always Ponk's area of expertise, but he could make things grow, if he had to.

It took a long time, it took tearing himself to pieces, it took metal welded to flesh over and over again, test run after test run, imperfections in homemade limbs and attempts at self actualization written in blood until *finally*, there was a body. It did not feel like *his*, not really, but it felt at all. That would have to be enough. Maybe he was always predisposed to become The Warden. The Warden was never at home in his own body, his body was a guarded thing, another cog in the prison's machine. One day The Warden would be his vessel of choice, but not yet.

Sam returned and he told everyone he had been traveling, vague meant safe. He no longer ran the risk of exhaling fumes, but he wore his gas mask anyway, so any discrepancies in his face, a copy never fully matching the original, would be hidden. He had apologies to make, reintroductions and new introductions, but he had a body that maybe he could live in again.

Sam had been gone for a long time. Long enough that when he returned to the Mainlands of the SMP perhaps a little changed, a little taller, a little less natural; it was long enough to go unquestioned. Time warps memories as much as anything. Maybe Ponk didn't recognize the scar that ran like a seam along his gas mask and maybe Bad hesitated, remembering him just a bit shorter. He fit in just as well as he always did. He was still Sam in every way that mattered.

And maybe, in the midst of a festival, Sam for a moment had felt relief, because when a young boy got blown to pieces, Sam's heart had raced and he had felt dread and panic, but there hadn't been smoke, at least not smoke from him. The world started burning down around him, a massacre, Sam having carried Ponk out of the wreckage and even the sight of them no longer whole, blood vibrant and the only thing left from the knees down, Sam had kept himself alive through it all. He could no longer be burned. Searching for that fuse inside of himself, he had found nothing. Maybe that should have counted as a loss, maybe he didn't feel things as strongly as he once had, but he got to live to feel at all.

In the beginning Sam found himself reaching. Moments where his thoughts were unoccupied, he felt drawn to his true body, a slight tug from the back of his mind, that curse of binding, trying to bring him home.

But eventually he made a new home in his vessels, they all served a purpose. Sam *wanted* to serve a purpose. And eventually, that little tether, from his soul back to his body, it became something unsettling, a weight around his ankle threatening to drag him to the bottom of some dark sea. He no longer knew what would be waiting for him if he went back. He settled so neatly into a body free of explosions or warning, some part of him began to dread his original body, to hate it for what it might do to him. He began to fear that the moment he tried to return to it, a body not allowed to feel, he would break apart. So he stayed away. Every vessel was just a little *off*, not quite in tune with his senses, but when that became his only known state, it no longer hurt him.

Other things hurt him instead.

Maybe he became reckless. Decades of his emotions kept bottled and carefully controlled, he had never been taught how to feel. Fear, anger, betrayal. He was ill-equipped to handle them.

He built a prison, built it just as he built a vessel. These things were meant to be soulless, and maybe Sam had no business existing inside of them, but there were more important things than him now. Sam became a soul encased in a vessel encased in armor, a cog in the machinations of a prison that was without escape.

His coping mechanisms were designed with an attainable goal, a goal he no longer needed to fulfill. So he stopped baking pies. He stopped fiddling with easy projects just until his mind settled. Sam had a new goal. He wrapped himself around the inner workings of the prison until it felt like another body he occupied. He stopped searching for calm and allowed emptiness to consume him instead.

It felt too easy to hurt Ponk. To Sam, the world was not hidden behind a fog, but rather by a sheet of glass. Ponk had hurt him, they had left him, stolen from him. So taking that back by whatever means necessary had only felt natural to Sam. Or rather, nothing had really felt natural to him, but it was an easy illusion.

Sam had cut off Ponk's arm and his empathy had flinched from the other end of a leash. There had been smoke when Ponk burned, but as long as Sam hadn't exhaled it instead, he would let go of their suffering.

Maybe if he had returned to his original vessel he would have realized his wrongs, the damages done, the way he had grown misshapen after so long apart from himself, but he didn't. He would never learn.

He did not learn when his friends grew possessed and corrupted and he had been helpless to stop them. He did not learn when he realized that he could not care for a boy in desperate need of it so he had to manufacture kindness in a metal vessel instead.

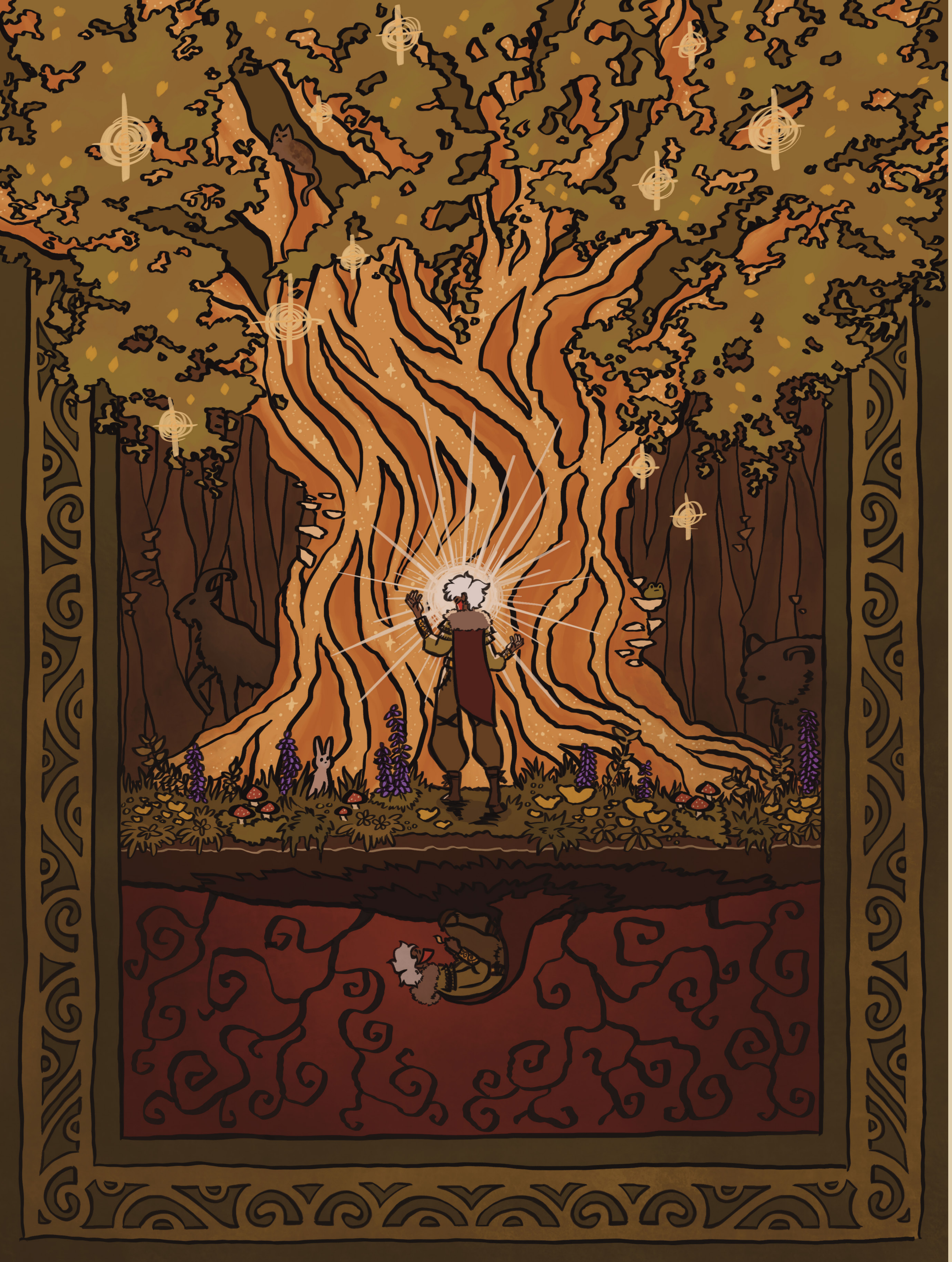
He did not learn when that same boy he had put upon himself to protect was trapped in the prison he built, trapped by *him*.

He did not learn when the day came where he had lowered that wall of lava and found a corpse instead of a child, but a lesson would be imparted upon him whether he wanted it or not. The monster he had kept caged laughed over a dead body and Sam had, for the first time in years, tasted smoke in the back of his throat.

When the impossible happened, maybe he should have seen that as a lesson. Maybe he should have believed, maybe the universe finally decided to punish him, to remind him of his place, but all he had thought had been that of a scientist, fear driven by logic– *where is the smoke coming from?*

The rest hadn't mattered. Sam had fled the corpse and the monster, and he had felt himself begin to burn from the inside out. It had been an impossibility, he had engineered The Warden to be beyond destruction, The Warden could not be destroyed from the inside out, that had been the *first* Sam, that had been a weak vessel, a version of himself he had kept carefully locked away where it couldn't be touched or broken.

Smoke bled out anyway. There was something wrong with him, something wrong not in body, but in soul. Sam was burning, and all he could do was keep moving. That day Sam was lucky, or perhaps unlucky. He fled to another vessel, he pushed off the end, but the damage had been done, and an explosion was a part of him now. Sam could not rest. He had pushed away from himself for so long there was nothing left to hold onto. He would build enough bodies that the gunpowder would have no time to grow like a tumor. He would run from himself until the fuse ran out. He would be alive. He would not live.



The Doctor and the Lemon Tree

MANY STORIES BEGIN with a once upon a time, and they end with a *happily ever after*. Or they don't; good storytelling is not limited to the pleasant or the hopeful, and a clear narrative is not the same as a happy ending.

Ponk, for example, did not have an ending at all. And happiness was never in the equation.

But even without an ending, there was a beginning, and Ponk's story began in their garden. Their life began a little while before that, of course; they were born, they grew up, and they made a few bad decisions along the way as most young people are prone to do, before finally settling on a few things that they loved. They loved their garden, and they loved when other people were in it.

They had a few favorite plants in the garden. Lilies, dahlias, and roses grew in flowerbeds and bushes. Rosemary, basil, and lavender grew in carefully-tended plots, pruned and picked along with the other herbs for cooking and healing. On the perimeter of the garden, where Ponk's yard turned into fields and forests, a few fruit trees grew as well. Figs, plums, and peaches filled the air with sweet smells and colorful blossoms.

After so long growing each of these plants and tending them with love and care, Ponk knew quite a bit about each of them. The villagers in the area often stopped by to ask for his advice and for some of his precious herbs.

"I've been having trouble sleeping," one of them would ask, and Ponk would brew them a cup of chamomile tea. He gathered up mint leaves as soon as someone stepped in with a hand over their middle and a complaint of, "My stomach just *really* hurts."

He'd even begun experimenting with reducing his harvested plants into a purified sort of oil. "Essential oils will be all the rage someday," Ponk told everyone. "Trust me."

But even with all of these beautiful, flourishing plants, Ponk couldn't help but feel that *something* was missing. There was an empty space in her heart, metaphorically, and an empty space in her garden, literally. She had a little pond right in the center with pretty rocks along the bottom and fish swimming around in it, which entertained the stray cats brought in by the smell of catmint on sunny afternoons, and right on the banks of that pond, Ponk kept an empty plot of grass. She always thought there should be a plant there, but none of hers were quite right, and she hadn't found new seeds of anything that said to her, *Plant me! Plant me right here and make me the center of your garden!*

So instead of planting anything there, she took to sitting on the plot instead. On sunny afternoons, she made like the stray cats and sprawled herself out in the grass to enjoy the sun's warmth.

On one such afternoon, Ponk began to dream of the plant that should be in this place.

It began with her feet sinking into the rich pond-side soil, curling and stretching into roots. The rest of her grew upwards, skin rippling and swirling into the shape of bark and trunk while her fingers stretched like branches up to the sky, reaching for the sun even though she might never touch it. Her hair curled outwards and bloomed into leaves and flowers. The flowers blossomed and then gave way to fruit, round and yellow as the sun.

This is a weird dream, she thought, even though trees didn't tend to have thoughts. But she felt like a very beautiful tree, and a very happy one, here in a well-loved garden on a sleepy sunny afternoon. So she dreamed on.

In the dream, she was the most beautiful tree that had ever grown. As she looked down upon her garden from towering heights that she had never reached before – Ponk was not very tall – she thought, *This is exactly the plant that should be here.*

This was the center of her garden: A magnificent tree with its slender branches and flowering fruits. She knew, then and there, that she had found it.

The only problem, of course, was that this was a dream. The tree did not exist in real life. So Ponk, hovering on the cusp of wakefulness and the sweet citrus scent of her dreams, did what anyone would do in such a situation. She began to pray.

Ponk was very dedicated to the Tortoise God, who ruled over his godly domain with peace and wisdom. So when she started up her prayer, he took notice, immediately recognizing his loyal follower.

"My child," the Tortoise-God said, regarding the dreaming individual fondly. "What is it that your heart desires?"

"This tree, bro," Ponk said. She gestured to the tree that she had previously become, but now was no longer attached to physically. Dreams were weird like that.

"This tree," the god said wisely, "is a very special one."

Ponk thought this was pretty obvious, since she'd just turned into it for awhile. But she wanted to seem respectful to God, so she just nodded along with this story.

"It only blooms when surrounded by utter peace," the Tortoise-God continued. "And joy. And love. And kindness. Beautiful things that make the soul bloom along with the flowers itself. It's a bit like a metaphor."

"True," Ponk said.

As the sweet citrus scent of sleep began to drift away and Ponk slowly found themselves blinking awake on the bank of their garden pond, the tortoise-god's words echoed in his ears as a parting farewell.

"Keep it safe," the tortoise-god told his follower. "Tend it well."

And when Ponk turned around, there was a tree in the soft soil behind them. It was only a sapling, but Ponk's heart leapt for joy all the same. They were delighted; even at this early stage, the tree was every bit as beautiful as Ponk had dreamed it to be.

After this, Ponk's daily schedule changed. It evolved with the addition of the new tree. Every morning, they slept in as late as a doctor could get away with, and then they got up to tend to the plants. They watered the bushes, and weeded the flowerbeds, and said hello to the stray cats on the rocks, and picked herbs to give to the townspeople. And finally, in the afternoon, they sat down on the bank of the pond and rested in the shade of their new lemon tree.

It was a good life. Spring turned to summer to fall, and the winter passed gently and mildly. The cats went away from their sunning rocks, now too cold to enjoy it. Time went on, as it is wont to do, and Ponk and her lemon tree went on with it.

Finally, it was spring again. Birds shouted their cheers from branches. The bushes burst their joy in brilliant colors. Once more, the ground became carpeted in lush greens and the purples and yellows of little flowers.

And in the middle of it all was Ponk's lemon tree – a tragedy waiting to be noticed.

In the center of the garden, withered and alone, sat the tree. Or what was left of it. The bark had been torn from every branch and stripped from the trunk, peeling away in horrible gashes. Every leaf was torn away, and every bud had been bitten off of the twig entirely. Nowhere was spared.

Ponk burst out of her house on the first day of spring. Horror took root in her stomach. There was her beautiful tree, the pride of her garden, and the joy of her life, *a gift from a god*, in ruins. Utterly destroyed.

"No!" Ponk cried out. "No, no, my tree! My poor, beautiful tree…"

It was then that she caught sight of two yellow eyes looking back at her from the top branches of the tree. A margay, perched within the ruined branches with bark still caught between his claws, regarded her coolly. His gaze met Ponk's eyes as though he had not a care in the world, and certainly not a care for this lemon tree, and Ponk knew suddenly what had been done here.

"You motherfucker," she said.

The margay stretched lazily. "I was only bored over the winter without the sun to lie in. You can't blame a cat for scratching."

"I sure as hell can," Ponk said, and she went inside to get a broom to chase the cat out of the garden with.

That afternoon, once Ponk had finished all of her chores and put the rest of her garden in order, she sat back on that grassy spot at the bank of the pond. No longer did she feel the warmth and joy afforded by the lemon tree; instead, she mourned it. But only for a moment, because she had an idea.

Under the branches that no longer gave any shade, Ponk leaned back in the grass, closed her eyes, and began to dream again.

"Hey, God," Ponk said in the dream, calling out to the Tortoise-God. "It's me again."

The Tortoise-God, of course, answered immediately. It had been a year since their last conversation, which seemed much shorter to an immortal god, but he was always happy to hear from his devoted follower. And he was eager to check up on the lemon tree.

But as soon as he saw the distress on Ponk's face, he realized that all must not be well with the tree. "My child, what is it? What's happened?"

"I did everything right," Ponk cried. "I watered it. I tended to it. I loved it." It was true; the lemon tree had wanted for nothing, save perhaps a fence a little higher to keep the cat out. "Give me another chance. I'll make the fence higher. Please, great Tortoise-God; allow me one more tree."

"Very well," said the Tortoise-God with a wise smile. "But take care with your fence, my child. Do not make it so tall you lose sight of the rest of the world."

"Of course I won't," Ponk said, because that was stupid and he would never. Also, he could always just go outside of the fence. Nobody ever said he couldn't leave the garden.

So he was given another sapling, and when he awoke, there it was. Replacing the splintered remains of the old tree was a new, young, healthy one. Ponk wept tears of joy, once more filled with delight and happiness within his garden. He set to work immediately, gathering up boards and nails and a sturdy hammer with which to improve the fence around his garden.

Cats were no longer allowed in Ponk's garden. For the rest of the year, whenever he saw one sunning itself upon the rocks, he chased it out before it even had a moment to look upon his beloved tree. He would not be making the same mistake twice.

Spring bloomed into summer, which dripped into fall and swept into winter. As the weather turned chill, Ponk holed up in his little house. He brewed teas and ground herbs and bottled oils, and he banked the fire to keep everyone who stepped foot over the hearth warm. He was still a doctor, after all; even over the winter.

Finally, winter broke. Spring burst back into life, and Ponk burst back into their garden.

The worst, unfortunately, had happened again. In the center of the garden, surrounded by blooming and budding bushes, flowers, and plants, sat the lemon tree – a sad, drooping remain of what it once was.

Rather than claws, this time it had been teeth that tore the tree down. Bark had been stripped and peeled from the trunk, and the soft flesh of the wood beneath was gouged with toothmarks. The branches had been eaten away, nibbled and gnawed until nothing remained at all.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Ponk said.

This time, the culprit stood on the firm ground of the garden: a goat, now content to graze among the grass after the destruction he had wrought upon the tree.

"How did you even get in here?" Ponk despaired, surveying their fence.

"I chewed my way in," the goat said. "Did you know wood is actually rather delicious? Maybe you shouldn't leave it out for everyone to go after."

Ponk began to consider a career change. Becoming a butcher did not sound so terrible in that moment.

This time, the Tortoise-God appeared to be waiting for Ponk. "Oh! It is that time of year again," he said when Ponk first greeted him. "How I enjoy these visits. Spring is such a lovely season."

"No time for chit-chat," Ponk said. "I need another tree."

The Tortoise-God really did want to see Ponk succeed after all of these failed attempts, but secretly he was beginning to wonder if perhaps the garden was not doing so well. Ponk had not even watered the other plants before sitting down to pray this time. "Are you sure?"

"My garden needs that tree," Ponk said. He couldn't bear to imagine his garden with that empty plot in the center anymore; after two years with the hope of the beautiful blooms and citrus scent, empty grass seemed like a real bummer. "I'll reinforce the fence again. I'll put up a scarecrow and noisemakers to keep the animals out. I'll go out every day over the winter. Nothing will get in this time."

The Tortoise-God nodded. "Very well, my child. Take this sapling. Raise it well."

"Thanks, man," Ponk said, and he took the sapling.

The third sapling was planted, and it grew, and Ponk looked over it. The year passed in a hurry. Ponk ran through their garden, and they hurried through their chores, and they rushed their patients out the door as soon as they were treated. Especially, they rushed any animals they saw right out of their garden and out of their home. Goats were added to the list of *KEEP OUT AT ALL COSTS,* just beside cats, and then for good measure, Ponk decided to keep out most animals in general.

They reinforced the fence. They locked the gate. Over the winter, they stepped outside every day to look at the tree, and then they stepped inside again to warm their hands by the fire.

This was how Ponk woke up with the smell of smoke in their nose.

At first, they wondered if someone was cooking. Then, they remembered that they lived alone, and if someone was cooking, that would be incredibly strange because no one had stayed the night either. Which meant their house could very well be on fire. Ponk leapt out of their bed and raced into the living room, where they found the fire… perfectly smoldering, as it should be first thing in the morning. The house was not, as it turned out, on fire.

But Ponk could still smell smoke.

They followed the scent around the house and through the kitchen, and then finally, out the back door.

And there, they beheld a horrible sight.

In the center of their garden was the lemon tree – or, what had once been the lemon tree, and was now only a pile of ash. And dusted in the ashes of their thrice-beloved tree, sat two creatures: a frog from his own pond, and a rabbit that had once eaten tomatoes from the vine.

"Why?" Ponk cried. "What reason could you *possibly* have to do this?"

"We were cold," the rabbit said. "We wanted only a fire to keep us warm."

Ponk, in their fury, began to shout. "You were *cold?* I've given you everything! I've given you a pond to live in and a home to keep; I've given you water to nourish and fresh-grown food to pick from. And *still* you burn the tree!"

"You don't let us in anymore," said the frog. "And the tree was ugly anyway."

Ponk wished that the frog lived anywhere but in a pond so that *they* could light it on fire and see how the frog liked it. But the pond was made of water, so instead, they satisfied themself with chasing after the animals and sending both the frog and the rabbit hopping from the garden as fast as their springing little legs could carry them.

And then Ponk sat on the bank of the pond, closed their eyes, and prayed.

"God," Ponk said, by way of greeting.

"Ponk," the Tortoise-God returned wearily. "Another tree?"

Ponk nodded. All he needed was one more chance. A final sapling. "This tree," he promised, "will be the last one."

The Tortoise-God really did not think this would be the case, but he saw the distress written clearly across Ponk's face, so a final sapling he gave. "Remember, my child, that the tree will only grow when surrounded by–"

"Love and peace," Ponk said. "I know. I got it. Thanks."

And this time, Ponk really meant it. In his garden, he built his fence as tall as it would reach. He locked his doors and gates, and he turned over the sign offering teas and herbs and tinctures, and he closed the gate. This year, Ponk would care only for himself, his tree, and his garden. If the world would be so insistent on tearing apart what he loved, on tearing down any beautiful thing it touched, then Ponk had no choice but to keep them apart.

The lemon tree grew. Ponk remained in solitude. He waited, season after season, for blooms to appear.

But the first spring came and passed, and the flowers never blossomed. The lemons never appeared. Summer passed without the scent of citrus. Autumn fell in the same way.

Ponk decided to be patient. These things happen! Sometimes it takes longer for plants to bloom. At least the tree was still standing.

But on the lonely dawn of the third spring, Ponk stepped outside to find the lemon tree wilted. Its flowers never blossomed. Its fruit never grew.

The lemon tree would only bloom in a land of peace, prosperity, and love. These were the instructions given by the Tortoise-God–and suddenly, Ponk understood. Her stomach sank as he looked over a wilted garden and a dead tree and his own folly.

There was no love in this garden anymore. There was nothing in it at all.

And so, on the first day of spring, under the branches of a wilted lemon tree, Ponk prayed to the Tortoise-God one last time.

"I understand now," she told the god. On the scaly beak of his mouth, a wise smile began to form. "I cannot keep the tree safe from the rest of the world. But I will go out into the world, and I will take the tree with me. Someday, I will find a place for it to grow."

The Tortoise-God was proud of her. He was sad, of course, that so much heartache had befallen her first, but he was still proud of her for finding a path onward despite it. So this time, he gave her a handful of seeds – one for each lost tree – and he gave her his blessing. "Travel well, my child. May you find a place for your roots to grow."

Ponk wrapped the seeds in cloth and kept them safely in her pocket. She said goodbye to her garden, and she packed her doctors' supplies and essential oils into a bag. (They really would be all the rage someday; she was sure of it. Perhaps the life of a traveling salesman was her true calling.)

With a bag over her shoulder and lemon seeds in her pocket, Ponk set out into the world.

And so this story reaches, not an ending, but a waiting. It's not a *happily ever after,* nor is it even an *ever after* at all. What it is is a promise: a someday. Ponk sets out to travel, and she takes the lemon seeds with her. And someday, perhaps her search will come to an end. Until then, she remains as we leave her: an endless wanderer in search of a place with enough love for a lemon tree to bloom.

Growing Season

A DEMON SAT by a river to wash his hands, and his grief sat with him.

Grief smelled like crushed mint and rosemary, and Bad’s mouth was full of it. It stuck beneath his fingernails, caught between claws with the grime of a garden. A day’s hard work bloomed in the water of the river, rippling outwards from his hands, in a cloud of mud.

Tell me, the river asked, babbling over rocks and whispering along the bank. *What have you to mourn today?*

The list of things Bad had killed today:

Thirteen varieties of weeds, growing in his flowerbed.

A beetle, accidentally crushed under his heel when he took a step back.

The fire, before he left the house. He knew not to leave something to burn unattended. Flames grow unwatched; embers burn loud out of sight. It’s only when you watch a thing that it becomes quiet in familiarity and compliance.

The river flowed quietly. Bad knew every word before it was spoken. His answer waited, just as quiet, in his mouth with the mint and rosemary.

You mourn more than you grow, the river whispered.

“Everything that grows reaches an end,” Bad said.

The first sowed seeds of Bad’s garden were planted with Skeppy. His soulmate was never one for gardening, but Bad wrangled him once into slowing down enough to pick out the plants for growing, to take a trowel and turn up soft soil, to press seeds and saplings beneath them.

Skeppy, of course, ended up throwing handfuls of mud at Bad more often than he planted anything at all. Bad wouldn't expect anything else from him. This was what he loved him, if not for, then at least despite.

Pranks aside, after a few dedicated days of work, they had a fully planted garden nestled between the bushes of their backyard. Bad watched it from the kitchen window, smiling softly, and he waited for the plants to grow.

This was how the years passed: They sowed seeds in the spring and watered them in the summer. In the fall, Bad stood in the kitchen and cooked and baked with the fruits of their garden. They raised a son in the winter, and when spring came, he sat in the garden with them.

His son found the thing that would ruin him.

Chubby baby's fingers, wrapped tightly around seeds Bad didn't recognize, and Bad showed him how to plant them. He was curious to see if they would grow, and eager to share the world with his child. In the summer, he guided his hands to pour water gently over a little sapling. In the fall, he stood by the stove with a baby on his hip.

The plant grew. His son grew beside it.

Time, for a demon, was difficult to measure. Seasons and years pass, and nothing changes save the layout of a garden and the ticks of a child's steadily growing height measured in pencil on the kitchen doorframe. This was what made time slow down. Love itself might be the only thing that makes an immortal demon want eternity to pause.

Here was the thing about gardens, sons, and demons: one would always outlive the others.

When their house was empty — when it was just Bad and Skeppy and a garden and time slowly bleeding out — Bad felt more like a ghost than a demon. He drifted from one season to the next with dirt under his fingernails. In the garden, his son's plant still grew, and now that it was out of sight, it grew quick. It spread red roots and branches across the garden.

Bad did not bother to trim it.

A demon sat by the river, alone, and grief sat with him. The sun was setting, and Bad still had hands to wash.

Growth tasted like blood, red-hot and sweet, snapping and popping in a boiling pot. Bad felt the heat of it on his hands, even submerged beneath the surface of a lake.

Tell me what you mourn today, the lake asked, as if it were an attempt to soothe. Bad's hands only burned.

“A tree I chopped down for firewood. The flowers I picked to give away. A calf not strong enough to survive.”

You mourn only what you've killed. Your grief is guilt too.

The river had killed too. A deer's carcass rotted beneath the surface, flesh picked away by minnows and water-crawling insects, and algae spread over its skull and the leg bones washed downstream by the current. The river knew its fair share of death.

Bad asked, “Do you not feel guilt?”

This is the way of all things, the river, cold against burning hands, said.

“I don't think I care for it.”

That is also the way of all things.

The water was mud and the sun was setting, and the river washed them both downstream. A demon walked home from the river with stars over his shoulder.

It changed him, the thing in the garden. It grew, and he grew it, and it grew him. It grows in the center of the garden and in the center of him, boils, bubbles, pops and snaps. He heard it, a heartbeat in his ears and vines in his veins where blood should be.

“The garden looks terrible,” Skeppy told him one day. “Are you going to clean it up this spring?”

And for a moment, all Bad heard was the boiling of something hot within him. A heartbeat in his ears, vines stretching through his veins where blood should be. This anger was not Bad’s, but it became all that he was.

When the anger subsided, Skeppy still looked at him, curious with a tinge of something darker. Concern, maybe. Fear.

“Never mind the garden,” Bad said. The words stumbled out of his mouth, as if he was biting them out. “Let’s have dinner together tonight. I’ll cook.”

The fruits of the garden were less now than they had once been, smaller and tougher and hardier. Plants that had fought to survive against the onslaught of overgrowth. He sliced tomatoes and beets, and there wasn’t enough juice in either of them to leave a stain anywhere but on the knife itself.

Over dinner, both stayed silent. Two people at a too-empty table. Skeppy ate slowly; Bad could not taste anything but a bitter heat on his tongue.

“You know,” Skeppy began, “Maybe I could help you in the garden again. We could work together again.”

Bad waited.

“I hardly see you,” Skeppy said. “We never do anything together.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You don’t tend to it. You don’t pay attention to me. Why don’t we do this together? Isn’t that what you’d want?”

This was what Bad should want, but something else in him wanted something else, and it mixed up with his own desires until he was left staring across a table at his soulmate with no words.

(Bad, in a mirror, no longer recognized himself. Red branches spread across his hands, up his arms, in his veins and in his eyes and even deeper. He was more plant than demon, perhaps. More anger than anything else.

This is the way it is to be a demon, something in his head whispered. This is what it is to have hellfire waiting to burn.)

“I think you should stay out of the garden,” Bad said, finally. And Skeppy’s eyes flashed, but he said nothing.

Silently, they finished dinner. Skeppy never asked about the garden again.

In the end – because everything ends – it was quick, and it was angry.

Bad stepped outside one morning to find his soulmate in the garden. First, he felt horror. And then, he felt fear.

He saw it, now. The crimson creeping at Skeppy’s veins, his eyes, his fingers and arms. When Skeppy looked back at him, kneeling in garden dirt, there was nothing but red.

“Bad,” Skeppy said, already wary. “You’re up.”

“You’re–You…”

“I’m tending to it. Since you were too busy for either of us, anyway.”

And this was where everything snapped.

He tore up the plant. Ignored Skeppy shouting at him; tuned it out to nothing but a buzz at his ear, and he could barely hear it over the way blood and anger and fire already raged within him. Instead, he dug his fingers deep into once-loved soil until he found roots. He tore it up, and he found more roots and tore them too, and fury that was both his and not-his burned so bright that nothing would survive it.

It burned and raged, on and on, until Bad had destroyed every place that something could grow. The ground was scorched with his fury, and finally, he was left in cooling ashes.

He sat, in a winter wasteland of soot like snow, and he knew it wouldn't be gone for good. Weeds return every year, and uprooting is a constant chore. But he'd done it now, and as fire smoldered low, Bad finally turned and looked at –

At an empty garden.

Bad's hands burned and burned and burned.

* * *

A demon sat by a river. You know where this goes by now.

Tell me what you mourn, the river said.

A caterpillar, unhatched and rotted in its chrysalis. A fruit tree, burned to the ground.

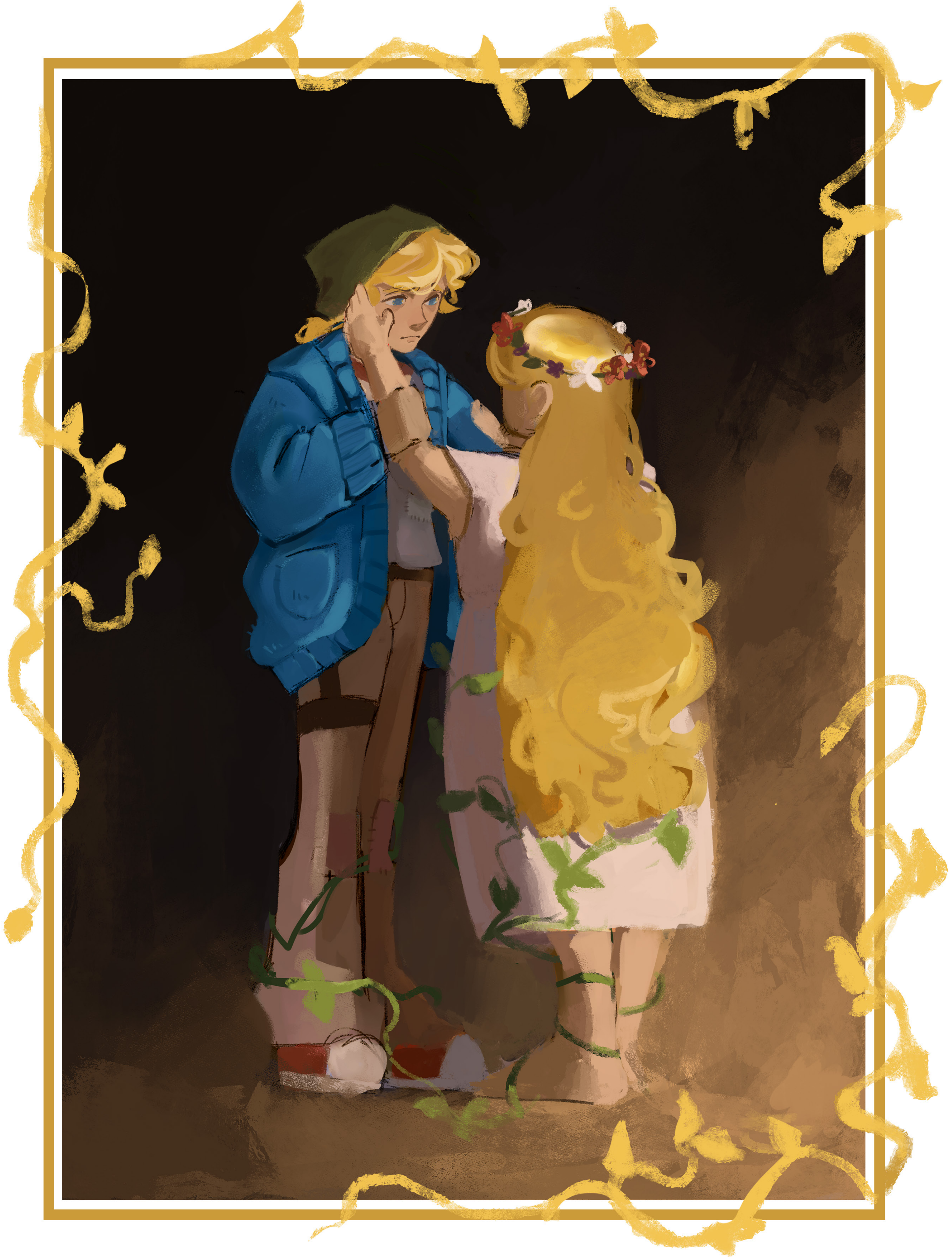
And you killed these too, I imagine?

"Something had to," Bad said. "Something has to kill everything."

There were no exceptions. Rivers dry up, or are filled in. Gardens overgrow with well-loved weeds. Demons love someone enough to tie their lives to them, and never loved them enough to regret it.

Grief stuck between his teeth like sprigs of rosemary, and it clung to his claws like stubborn garden grime. He plunged his hands beneath the river's surface.

Bad watched rust bloom in the current, and he watched algae claim a corpse for its own. The current flowed on anyway.



Born of Life

LONG AGO, BEFORE even the Nether's eternal flames were lit, there were but four gods.

The first of these was Dream XD. The first of these gods, it is said that he is the great guardian, a beacon of justice for the affairs of both the mortal and divine. It was said that those who won his favor would be blessed beyond their wildest dreams.

The second was Blood. The brother of XD, Blood was said to be a violent and angry god, who relished in bloodshed. His favored warriors could turn the tide of wars with a single stroke of their blades.

Third was Death. While many feared her, Death was said to be the kindest of the gods. Her chosen angels were blessed with eternal life, stamping their mark on all of history.

And lastly, was Life.

The sister of Death, Mother Life was the most elusive of the gods. Largely unconcerned with the affairs both mortal and divine, Life spent much of her time wandering the earth, content to spend her immortality amongst her creation.

Unlike the other gods, no mortal had ever won Life's favor. While she was no doubt respected with festivals and prayers, Life's influence was always muted, subdued. A cool breeze on a hot day, the funny faces you'd find in the clouds, these were said to be the work of Life. And with her small gifts to humanity, she was happy.

But as the years stretched on, Life's mood began to sour. At first, she thought that the dull ache of her heart was nothing more than homesickness. And so for a time, she returned back to the End, the realm of gods, to partake in the company of her fellow immortals. But even that did not cure the sadness that seemed to overcome her.

For centuries more, she languished in her palace, the same prayers reaching her ears every morning. A young girl asking for help with her sick wolf cub, a king asking for eternal youth, a shepard asking for help with his lost sheep.

And Life attended to her duties, granting boons and answering the wails of her followers, until the pain that had blossomed in her chest seemed to encompass her entire being, and the First Mother resigned herself to eternal misery.

Until one day, as she attended to her duties, an unfamiliar voice reached her ears, as a special prayer found its way into her garden. A prayer that would change everything.

The rustling of leaves was always the first sign.

Sitting in her sacred garden, Life was quick to notice the stiff breeze that blew through her realm, shaking the trees and disrupting the otherwise pristine silence.

The telltale signs of a prayer.

Life sighed, the familiar cooling breeze finally reaching her spot in the grass. Prayers had been rarer these last few days, and she had expected her daily walk in her sacred gardens to be uninterrupted. But the work of a goddess was as immortal as she herself was. Slowly, she closed her golden eyes, and allowed the breeze's whispers to reach her ears.

Uhm, hello Ms. or Mrs. Goddess, I uh... I hope you're doing well.

Life's head tilted slightly. Not only did the formality of the greeting catch her off guard, but the voice was unfamiliar. Over the centuries, she had assumed that she had heard every voice on earth one time or the other. But this one, deep and slightly unsure of itself, was undeniably new.

And it intrigued her.

I'm sorry I'm not really used to this but, Mother raised me to be grateful and well I'm nothing if not her son. He chuckled. Sorry am I not supposed to laugh? Forgive me it's... been a while since I've last done a prayer.

Anyways, I won't take much more of your time. Just wanted to give you some thanks. See uh, Winifred, my cow, she got very sick a bit ago. Doctor said there was nothing they could do, and while I was hoping she'd get better it doesn't seem like that's going to happen. She's in a lot of pain and so I'm going to put her down tomorrow.

I wanted to thank you for her life. She served me well, and it may be silly but she means a lot to me. So, thank you, Ms. Life. for my stubborn old girl. May she rest well in your care.

The rustling of the leaves subsided, and Life was left sitting, stunned.

For the next few weeks, four words would consume the goddess's thoughts.

Thank you, Ms. Life

Weeks stretched into months, and soon the prayer was all that the goddess could concern herself with. In all her walking moments, the simple *thank you*, obsessed her. Even the angels of the End began to take notice, and soon whispers began to circle the realm of the gods.

Did you hear of the goddess's new prayer?

What was said to make her act so strange?

Who could have sent such a prayer?

Soon, the First Mother was overcome with curiosity. And so one night, she gathered at the brink of her sacred pool. Slowly, she dipped a finger into its still waters, and muttered a quiet request:

"Show me the man who sent me the prayer."

The waters of the pool rippled and shimmered, slowly collecting into a shimmering image of a small farmhouse. The grass was well kept, but the house's wood was worn, the paint peeling off in patches. The image rippled and changed, this time settling on a small garden. It was fenced off the side of the farmhouse, and there, tending to the land was a man.

He wore plain clothes, and a sunhat concealed his face. Life watched as his hands tenderly kept to their duties, using a trowel to dig a small hole, then placing a seed tenderly inside. His hands, which looked calloused and rough, moved gently to cover the seed, before reaching for a watering can and watering it well.

When he finished, he turned, and the goddess saw his face. It was no doubt handsome, in a rugged sort of way. His face was scarred, but he smiled contently as he went to wipe the sweat from his brow. His blonde hair was stuck to his forehead, but what caught the goddess's attention were his eyes, which were a stunning, deep blue. They almost seemed to glow against his tanned skin, and they glinted with the same sense of good-natured humor that filled his face.

The goddess sat for hours, enraptured by how spectacularly ordinary and yet beautiful the man looked. After all this time building an idea of him in her mind's eye, she had half-expected him to glow as bright as the sun. But there he sat, strikingly average in the reflection of her pool.

The next morning, when her handmaidens came to check on her, they were surprised to find her sacred gardens empty.

Life had vanished.

* * *

Daneus was tired.

Sure, part of that probably had to do with the fact that he had spent the better part of the morning toiling away in the fields with nothing but a sunhat as protection from a brutal beatdown courtesy of the big glowing ass in the sky.

He chuckled. As much as he complained, the work was rewarding in its own way. The few animals he had left kept him company, and his small garden made up for the meals he couldn't afford. So he was content, and as he settled into a rickety chair, he welcomed the exhaustion like an old friend.

He yawned and his eyes drooped, the world around him fading in and out of focus, and the weight of his eyelids became very noticeable. The wonderful promise of an afternoon nap relaxed his shoulders, and before he knew it his eyes were closed and-

There was a sharp knock at the door.

Denaeus sighed. Of course now was when he received a visitor for the first time since the doctor came by.

He tested his luck.

"None of the animals are for sale. Try the market in town."

Three more knocks.

He swore under his breath and tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes as he lifted himself slowly out of the chair.

"Alright alright I'm coming no need to-"

Denaeus opened the door. He was greeted with an angel.

Blonde hair that almost seemed to glow in the sunlight, an impish face, and a wonderful smile. And those eyes, grey flecked with gold, they caught his attention instantly. She was nothing short of a goddess.

"Hello, is this the Innett farm?"

For a moment, Denaeus couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. She was almost insultingly beautiful, and his mouth seemed to refuse to cooperate out of spite.

Eventually, though, he managed to get back to his right mind.

"Uhm, yes, uh, sorry." He rubbed the back of the neck. "What brings you up?"

She eyed him curiously.

"I.." She trailed off, that same puzzling look on her face. Almost as if she looked through him instead of at him.

She thrusted out her arm, which was holding a bucket.

"I heard that your cow died, I had some extra and thought that you could use it."

Without another word, she set down the pail of milk and began to walk away.

Luckily, instinct worked quickly, and Denaeus called out, "Wait," before she got too far.

She turned back.

"Would you, uhm, like to come in? It's a rather warm day."

Again, she gave him that strange look, the one that seemed to betray some hidden objective. An inquisitive stare that pierced right through his skin. And for whatever reason, Denaeus felt he needed to satisfy that curiosity.

Eventually, she answered, "As long as I'm not too much trouble."

He smiled in victory.

"Oh nonsense, Mother taught me to never turn away a guest."

While she entered, he asked "Sorry I never got your name, miss."

For some reason, she paused. His smile faltered for a moment, wondering what could have caused the hesitation. But she smiled again, that gorgeous smile, and responded, "Sarah. I'd like to be called Sarah."

* * *

But little did the man know, that the woman who had gave him the milk was none other than the first mother herself, wearing Sarah's skin like a shawl. She had intended only to visit once, promising only to pick the brain of this handsome farmer and perhaps leave him some heavenly token of gratitude, but no matter what, she always found herself returning the next day.

She learned much about him in this time, how he had been a soldier in some war, how his parents lived in a town far away, and how he had taught himself to juggle flaming swords during his time in the army. He was also a fantastic liar (though he preferred 'story-teller').

And she learned his name, Denaeus. And soon, it became the only name that she concerned herself with, besides Sarah, of course. The name of her mortal form. The form that she found herself residing in longer and longer, as the days became weeks, and the weeks months.

And before she knew it, there was a ring placed on Sarah's finger. A gorgeous blue diamond that Denaeus had inherited from his father's father. One that she noted was probably worth more than his entire farm.

He had just laughed when she mentioned it, and explained something that he had probably explained to her thousands of times over the years (it really had been years).

He explained that the diamond could have probably paid for a new house, or a new fence, or at the very least repairs. But Denaeus never had any need for it. To him, there were things more valuable than a new coat of paint. He told her that what he wanted out of life was way beyond anything that the gem could buy.

She didn't know whether to kick or kiss him. It was a question that she often pondered.

Eventually she settled on a simple yes.

And soon after, a lovely baby boy was born, which they named Tommy. And for the first time in forever, Life felt truly content.

But by now, chaos was stirring in the End, for the disappearance of

Life had wrought turmoil. XD ordered the angels to search the entire earth for the First Mother, and eventually, one returned with news.

She told him that she had found Life in a small village, disguised as a mortal. But when the angel revealed that she was with child, XD became furious. No immortal had beard the child of a human, and he feared what ramifications the baby could bring. So, he ordered Death to kill the child, and return the First Mother to the End.

A cool chill blew through the home, stirring Sarah awake. She glanced to the left, but Danaeus was still sound asleep at her side.

Perhaps he hadn’t felt it.

Sarah tried to fall back to sleep. But for whatever reason, she couldn’t. A strange uneasiness had overtaken her. Slowly, as to not wake her husband, she rose from her bed and went to check on Tommy, just to calm her nerves.

The crib was empty.

Panicked, she went to raise Danaeus, but no matter what, she couldn’t get him to wake up.

“Nothing short of a ghast’s wail would be able to raise him.”

Sarah whipped around.

There, standing in the doorway, was a womaen clad in a flowing black dress. Her lips and eyes were black as well, and her hair blew unnaturally, as if caught in an intangible wind. And cradled in her arms, peaceful as a lamb, was Tommy.

“Sister... is that-”

“Hello, Life.”

Sarah stood, stunned. She had never expected to see her here.

“When were you going to tell me I was an auntie?” Death asked. It was said with that same warm smile that Sarah had so dearly missed, but even that couldn’t do away with the uneasiness at the back of her mind.

Because Death *never* left the end.

“How-why are you here?” Sarah asked.

The smile vanished from her sister’s face. She shifted her gaze downward, towards the child resting against her chest.

“He’s a lovely thing.”

“Why are you *here*?” She said it more as a command than a question. Death wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“The End is in chaos, sister,” Death started. “Your disappearance left many of the angels in shambles. And now this child...” She rocked Tommy slowly in her arms. “XD is displeased.”

Such a simple statement, and yet it chilled Life to her bones. Nothing good came from the displeasure of an immortal.

“He...” Death finally lifted her head to meet her sister’s gaze. Her face was now stone, and to any mortal it’d be flawless marble. But Life saw the few cracks in the jagged rocks, and felt a bit of her heart break.

“XD has demanded you return to the End immediately, and...”

“And what?”

...

“And what!?”

“And he wishes the boy dead.” The words were delivered with an icy edge.

Life had a horrific look on her face, and slowly, a low rumble began to shake the floors of the house. Thick vines suddenly erupted from the floorboards and coiled around Sarah’s arms, sprouting thorns and flowers. Her hair sprouted flowers as well, and her nightgown began to stretch and morph. The worn threads were replaced with milky silk, and her eyes began to glow with harsh golden light.

“*You would* dare *threaten my son?*”

She spoke with a chorus of voices, as if all of creation was outraged with Death.

“Sister, please listen to reason for just a moment,” Death pleaded, clutching the boy close.

“*Let him go!*”

“I will not harm him, I swear! Please for a moment just-“

“*LIAR!*”

Life thrust out her hand and a vine shot out from the floor, blasting towards Death. But on contact with the goddess’s skin, the whole thing withered and died.

Death grimaced.

“If I leave the boy, XD will simply send an angel, or failing that his brute of a brother to finish the job. He won’t rest until his orders are carried out, and the punishments for both of us will be severe.”

Life still held up her hand, ready to launch another attack, but the fury on her face subsided, just a bit.

“The only way to save him is if you return to the End with me, and if XD thinks the boy no longer lives.”

Life was frozen. The golden glow that had overcome her eyes had faded completely now, leaving the mortal eyes of Sarah to stare dumbfounded at her sister.

“But how would you-“

Realization dawned on her face, then. The vines and flowers fell to the floor, and she rushed desperately towards her sister. She fell to her knees and clutched the goddess’s skirts.

“There must be some alternative. Anything but...”

Death knelt to meet her sister. She passed the boy, still asleep, into her arms.

“It would keep him hidden indefinitely. All I need is your permission.”

Life looked down at the child resting in her arms. His hair was unnaturally long for such a young boy, but the golden locks, a gift from his mother, spoke to the strange circumstances of his birth. His face was the perfect picture of innocence, and although he denied it, the spitting image of his father.

“Oh my darling boy, if nothing else, know forever that your mother loves you.”

She passed the boy back to her sister, whose stony facade had finally faded. Dark tears ran down her face, but those were soon carried off by the same invisible wind which seized her hair.

So a curse was placed upon the boy, one that hid him safely in Death’s embrace, but one that separated him fundamentally from his mother. So Sarah Innett vanished that night, and poor Denaeus was left to raise Tommy alone.

But the curse hadn’t simply hidden the boy, it had marked him supernaturally as property of the damned. And with this marking came the luck of the damned, which spread like an infection to all in the poor farming town. Denaeus soon became deathly ill, and with no other choice, he put the boy, barely 3 years old now, up for adoption. He died not two weeks later.

And from the heavens, Life watched, powerless for the first time in her immortal life.

So the boy grew quickly, and Life watched from afar, watched her boy get into fights when the older kids in the orphanage would steal from the younger, watched as he helped nurse the sick infants back to health. Watched as he tried to teach the injured ravens he'd help to swear.

She watched as he grew even older and escaped the orphanage, made a home of his own, and even made a friend. She watched him happily here, though she knew it wouldn't be for long. She had learned her boy was restless, never content to stay in one spot for too long. So soon his travels commenced once again. Until eventually he traveled to the lands of the SMP.

He grew faster there. First a soldier, then a general, a Vice President, an exile. Life was proud, and yet all at once she was sad, for she saw the way these titles jaded him, how the title of child became an insult rather than a reality. She watched him become bitter and angry, watched him flinch when his friends would raise their voices.

She watched him die.

And she got oh so sick of watching.

* * *

Tommy opened his eyes.

It took him a second to realize why that felt so odd.

The memories bubbled up slowly, the sweat mixed with blood, the crunching of bone, the aching pain, the light fading slowly...

Yeah, his eyes definitely shouldn't be open.

Not that there was much to see.

Wherever he was was pitch black, and seemingly endless.

"Hello, Tommy,"

"What the fuck!?" Tommy whipped around, raising his fists instinctively.

The voice belonged to what Tommy could only describe as an angel.

She had a long flowing white dress that seemed to be woven together with vines. Somewhere in his mind, the tailor in him noted how impractical that must be, but those thoughts were drowned out by the fear that had settled into his stomach, freezing him in place.

"Who-what, are you?!" Tommy called out, keeping his fists up.

The figure didn't answer, instead, it floated towards him, and before Tommy could protest she reached out a hand to cup his face. Her hands were cool against his skin, but not uncomfortable.

"Oh my darling boy," she spoke again, "How you've grown."

Surprise was quickly replaced by fear, however, and Tommy pulled back.

"What are you talking about? And, another thing, where the fuck am I?"

"You're Nowhere," the woman said, attempting to drift closer to him again, but Tommy held his hands out, stopping her in her tracks.

"Stay the fuck away from me, alright!? I have no idea what's going on and I'm... not too keen on the whole fucking ghost hug thing you're trying to get me with okay so, just stay over there! Don't come any closer!"

The woman went quiet, and her brows and lips slanted down. After a moment, she chuckled and spoke. "That's right, you wouldn't know who I am. You were so young after all."

She was smiling now, but Tommy could tell it was forced.

"What do you mean?" Tommy's arms lowered, just a bit.

"I'm Life, and I'm your mother, Tommy."

It was spoken so plainly, as if she hadn't just rocked Tommy's entire world with those words.

"...What?"

"I'm sorry, I know it's a lot but, you're my son and-"

"No, no, no, hold on a fucking second okay?" Tommy took a step back. "But how are you-" Tommy seemed to realize something.

"We're both dead aren't we? We're both fucking dead and this is heaven, isn't it?"

The woman chuckled again. "Not exactly." She gestured around to the nothingness to her left and right. "You're in Nowhere, where all of Nothing resides."

"Uh huh," Tommy nodded. He knew he'd been too optimistic with the heaven comment. "Why?"

Again, the woman went quiet, working hard to keep her smile from dropping.

"Because... I couldn't protect you."

That hadn't been what Tommy had expected her to say.

"All this power at my fingertips and yet I couldn't keep you safe." She chuckled bitterly. "I'd failed as a mother, Tommy, and I couldn't stand losing you, not without saying goodbye. Not again. So, before Death's angels could collect your soul I brought you here."

"So I really am..." Tommy put a hand to his head.

"I'm so sorry, little one."

Dead. The word didn't even taste right to Tommy's tongue.

"Well, I suppose I should thank you, miss uh, mum?"

The woman chuckled again. It was a lovely sound, her laughter.

"I don't have a given name, but the mortals call me Life."

It took Tommy a moment to really decipher what that meant. When he did, his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

"You mean you're-which mean I'm..." Tommy's brain was moving a million miles an hour now.

"Yes, you're the son of a goddess, Tommy."

Tommy scoffed. "Funny, I'm part fucking life god, and yet I died at 17 without really having ever done anything with my life."

Life frowned at that. "What do you mean?"

"Well think about it. L'manburg? Gone. My hotel? Probably gonna go under the minute they get the news. My friends are all still out there living life, but I'm dead in a cell without anyone even knowing."

"My life's been nothing but a fucking downhill cart crash from day one."

Life was silent again. But when Tommy turned to look at her, there didn't seem to be a sadness on her face. Instead, she seemed, lost in thought more than anything.

After an agonizing minute, she spoke.

"What do you think life is, Tommy?"

Tommy looked up. "What?"

"It's a simple question. How would you define life?"

Tommy thought for a moment.

"I don't know. I guess, like, breathing and shit? Not being dead?"

The corner of Life's mouth quirked up.

"Interesting. Now. watch closely."

Life waved her hand through the air, but as she did, golden tendrils of light began to trail behind her fingers. The strands began to morph together, eventually stretching and folding together to form a college of shimmering pictures. There was Tubbo and Tommy running through some forest, grinning ear to ear as they did. There was Eryn and Tommy standing infant of a massive crater, with smirks and gunpowder on their faces. There was Tommy, clad in his old general's uniform, shield raised, dragging some poor troop out of a hailstorm of arrows.

And there in the center of it all, was a smiling man holding a giggling baby. He seemed tired, with dark bags under his eyes, but at the same time Tommy could tell that he wasn't bothered by it. He seemed all too happy as the boy in his hands smiled brightly and reached for his face.

Tommy quirked his head, intently scanning the middle image. He turned to look at life briefly before pointing at the baby and asking, "Is that me?"

The goddess nodded. Tommy shifted his gaze to the man holding him.

"So that must be..."

"Your father. His name was Danaeus." Life smiled sadly, as she looked at the smiling face of her lost love.

Tommy continued to stare at the golden picture.

"What was he like?"

Life sighed.

"Well he was strong, for one thing. A soldier and a farmer. He was charming, and a fantastic liar. And he was unabashedly human."

Life placed an arm on her son's shoulder.

"See Tommy, life isn't just the breath in your lungs. It's the rustling of leaves on an autumn day, it's the smiles on your friends faces. The things that make life worth living."

Tommy turned to face his mother.

"I'm as much the goddess of pranks as I am the goddess of the tides. Because life is what you choose to make of it."

Life looked into her boy's blue eyes, so much like his father's, and smiled.

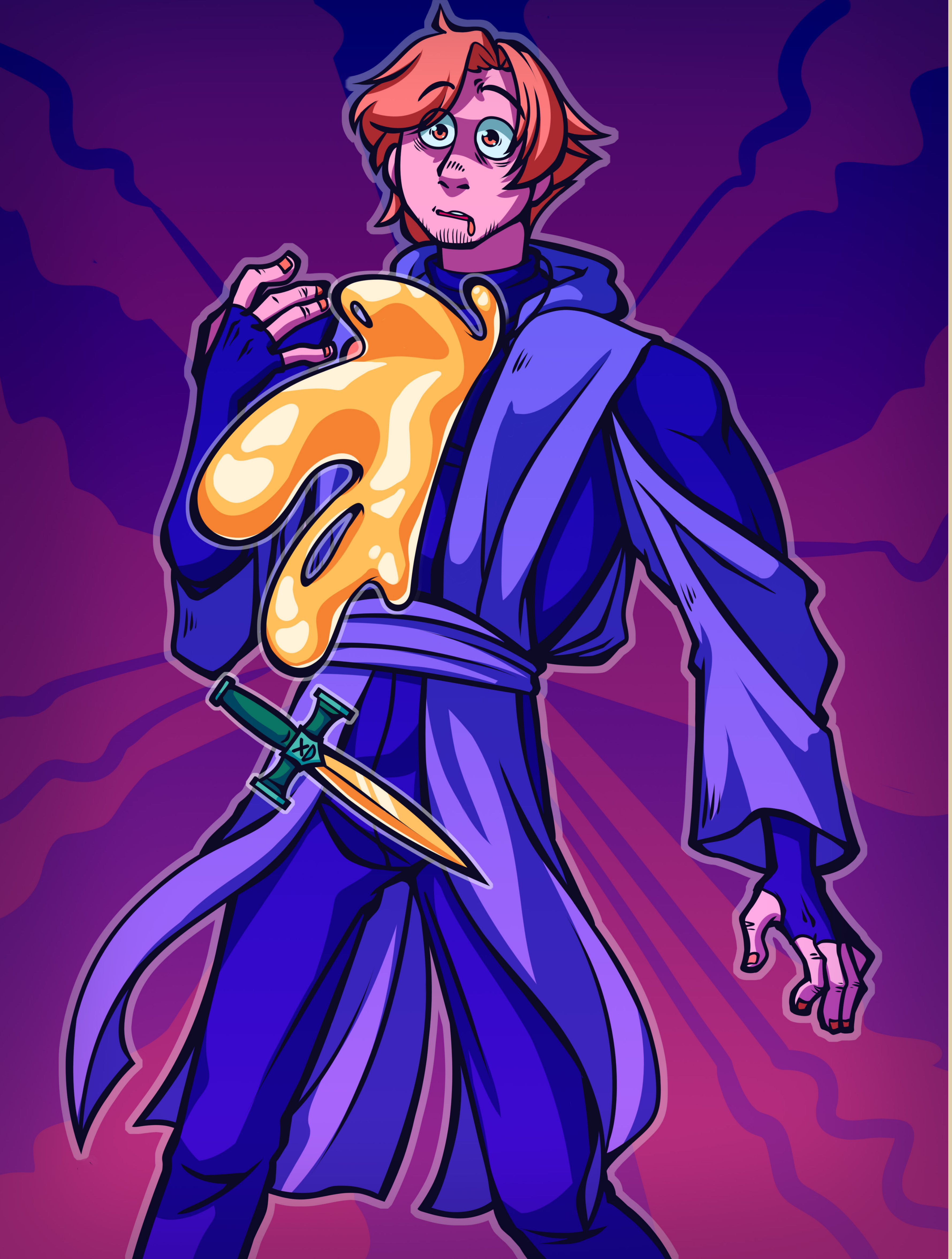
"You were just like him in so many ways. But the most important thing was that you loved life. You loved with a heart that I'd admired from afar from your entire life. You never cared for what people would try to force you into, you forged your own path. And I don't think I could have asked for a better person to carry my legacy."

Both mother and son had tears in their eyes. Neither really cared. For the first time, they got to be a mother and son. They got to embrace tightly, and whisper thank you's into each other's ears.

And Tommy smiled.

* * *

So Life wept, as her boy returned to grasp of her sister. But a burden had been lifted from her heart, and she felt a little better now, because now she knew that her boy loved her, and she knew that she loved him too.



Stupid Idiot Death Knife.

ONCE UPON A time in a land not too far from our own, there was a tower, and inside of that tower was a man on fire. Why he was on fire is not important, nor is the question as to how he came to be on fire. What is important is that there was a man, and that he was on fire, and that he was very unhappy with his current situation.

"Fucking *Tommy*," he swore (for that was the name of the absolute *jackass* that had set him on fire in the first place), hurriedly rushing to the nearest water basin to try and douse himself. "I'm going to *kill* him, I swear to *god*."

(And that was where his troubles began, because when you swear to the gods, they sometimes even listen.)

He was in so much of a hurry to put himself out that he didn't notice the sudden flash of light or the sudden trumpeting of angelic horns so high up in the heavens that even his tower couldn't reach. He didn't notice the sudden change in air pressure, nor did he notice the rise in temperature.

What he did notice when he turned around from the basin was a tall golden table standing right in the middle of the floor where there was no table before. And then on that table was what appeared to be, by all means necessary, a dinky little rusty-ass dagger, and a neon green index card next to it covered in scribbly red-ink letters in a language he didn't know. The only word he could make out was his name, *Punz*, and that alone was worrying enough to keep him from approaching fully.

"What the fuck?" Punz asked, voice barely above a whisper. It was not terror that gave a notable termor to his voice, though it really should have been. No, it was confusion, and, above all, *annoyance*.

He stared at the dagger, hair still smoldering and hoodie singed beyond all recognition. He was insulted, frankly, *just a little.* Just a little. Not because of the sudden divine intervention, but because whatever force had decided to bother him gave him the shittiest fucking knife that he had ever seen. Fae, demon, god, *whatever* it was, it obviously didn't know his reputation. Because he was a mercenary, the best of the best. Diamonds were beneath him; how could iron even think to compare?

But still, he found himself picking the dagger up and turning it over in his hands. It had a good weight, at least, and the edges were still sharp. The rust almost looked like a bloodstain spread across the entire blade.

Once more, he repeated, "What the fuck?"

His eyes shifted from the knife to the card that had come with it. What were scribbles a moment ago were suddenly clear and legible English.

Use Me :)

And, now, Punz wasn't a *stupid* man. He might not have been Dream or Wilbur levels of intelligence, but he knew enough to know that suspicious knives with even more suspicious labels were *baaaaaaad* news.

"Fuck this," he declared, dropping the knife back onto its pedastal and backing away.

He looked up at the ceiling as if it was watching him. (It was.)

"Yeah, no thanks," he told the ceiling.

On a whim, he flipped the card over and written on it was, *And Get Your Just Rewards.*

And, now, Punz wasn't a *stupid* man. He was not stupid, no, but he was greedy. Greed makes the world go 'round, so they say. So when he saw the word '*rewards*', his brain momentarily shut down. Little green dollar signs floated above his head, and he himself felt as if he was floating on a cloud.

"I mean, I dunno…" he muttered, running a finger along the knife's edge. It came away bloody, but he couldn't tell his blood from the rust on the blade. "It's just kinda fishy, y'know?"

He glanced back up at the ceiling again, waiting for a reply. No dice.

As his eyes traveled back down to the dagger, they caught on a shine on the table that wasn't there before. A single chunk of raw gold right where the dagger had been.

Oh, Punz thought. The gold was cool against his burned palms.

"My just rewards, huh?" he mused. He nodded. "Alright. Bet."

And with that, he slipped the dagger into an empty sheath on his belt, and he stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth, and he took the gold to a chest upstairs, and he thought, *Alright. I can work with this.*

There are very few things more powerful in this world than greed. Spite is one, hunger is another. (And then there was fear, but that was hardly relevant.) The other three he could work with.

One, greed. He never liked to consider himself a greedy man. The word left a bitter taste in his mouth. Greed, no, he was just… well, he was greedy, but not in *that* way. Who wouldn't want money? Money makes the world go 'round. If he was broke, he wouldn't be able to afford food or clothes or fancy decorative swords to hang on his walls, or Fortnite V-Bucks. It was just simple economics. Not greed; stonks.

Two, spite. Punz liked to consider himself a pretty chill guy, all things considered. He wasn't *Sapnap* or *Tommy*; if someone pissed him off, he just let it slide. Usually. Sometimes. Well. The thing about spite is that it mixes with anger and makes a kind of pissy kind of soup. Punz knew that soup well. He had it for dinner every night alongside caviar and imported English iced tea.

Three, hunger. Punz liked food. Enough said.

But fear? Nah. That wasn't his style. What did he have to be afraid of? Dying? He couldn't die. He was badass. Kickass, even, all of the -asses. Death feared *him*.

Death rewarded him, too. One lazy afternoon Punz took his new knife out to the forest to test something out and came home to a pile of gold on the table and five rabbit pelts and ten wolf skins slung over his shoulders. Death wasn't a scary thing. Death was just a capitalist. He could fuck with that.

But there was a difference between killing animals and killing humans. Punz preferred his kills to be clean and efficient. Nothing's worse than getting blood on your white hoodie, he figured, and maybe he should have just changed his aesthetic. Maybe he should have done that. But what he did instead was do things meticulously, so meticulously, and it worked.

And it worked.

And it worked until there was a battle for a country he had no part in and that he didn't care about. A dethronement, and then a war, all in the same day. He would have stayed home and ignored the whole affair in favor of catching up on *Grey's Anatomy* if he wasn't getting paid enough money to drown a cat with. (And, being friends with Sapnap, he knew *plenty* about drowning cats.)

It was in the heat of battle when Punz stabbed his first child. Pogtopia wasn't the most populous nation in the world (if you can call it a nation to begin with), but it had enough supporters to make Punz's attempts at getting at the commanders *really fucking hard*. He had already lost his sword in the initial rush, and that was fifteen minutes ago. Fifteen minutes and a couple of chunks ago. His ax was stuck in the chest of a woman on the ground, and his shovel really wasn't up for battle.

So when the kid snuck up on him, Punz grabbed the only weapon he had on him and plunged it into their chest blindly, eyes defocusing as they stared up at him in shock. His face was warm from exertion and blood. Sticky. His hands were sticky.

A small tickle in the back of his mind told Punz that he got blood on his hoodie. A much larger tickle told him that there was a good chance that he had just become a gold ingot richer. A gold ingot could pay for so many chocolate bars.

It wasn't too hard a decision to make. His hoodie was already ruined, anyway. He could just buy a new one after the war.

Yanking the dagger out of the kid's cold body, Punz slipped it into its sheath just long enough to wrench his ax free of the corpse holding it.

By the end of the war, Punz was a half stack of raw gold blocks richer.

This, he decided, looking down at the chest of gold in front of him. This would be enough to last until the next war.

* * *

Three weeks later, the dagger slipped between a crack in Sapnap's armor. It was almost worth enough for an ice cream cone.

* * *

One, greed.

Punz was not a greedy man. He was just a capitalist. Big difference. Greed requires a certain amount of *other*, some extra oomph to give it meaning as anything other than just plain old *want*. It isn't greedy to want a new pair of boots. It isn't greedy to want a Robux gift card. It isn't greedy to just *want*.

There is a difference between wanting something and craving it. Punz never *craved* the rewards he got for killing. He *wanted* them. Big difference. He could put the dagger away and never touch it again. He simply chose not to. He liked getting money. Money is cool as hell. So are the things you can get with money. Like a new PlayStation. Or a hamburger at the McPuffy's when you don't feel like baking a fresh loaf of bread.

* * *

Punz liked explosions. They were loud and, well, *explosive*, and they reminded him of happier times when all he had to worry about was childrens' attempts at war and Sapnap being a fucking idiot. Punz had always been one for chaos, and nothing, *nothing* was more chaotic than an explosion.

But as the butchers scattered before him like headless chickens, there wasn't the usual rush of adrenaline. Punz was almost *bored* as he chased the L'Manbergians around. He was bored when he let them chase *him* around.

The knife on Punz's belt *itched*.

He wasn't explicitly told *not* to kill anyone, but he wasn't told to do anything other than distract. But he was *bored*, and that was making him sloppy. He let himself get hit in the shoulder with an arrow and grit his teeth into a grin at the sudden burst of energy he got in response, blade singing in its sheath.

Fundy had a crack in his armor. The butchers' armor was ragged and worn, obviously leftover from the war, and Fundy had a crack in his armor.

It wasn't until Punz felt the weight in his pockets that he realized that the knife had made contact.

Fundy let out a cry, and Punz felt the knife shaking in his grasp, but he wasn't moving. *Punz wasn't moving.*

The call to retreat, Dream's voice in Punz's ear telling him to get the *fuck* out of there.

Three dollars. Chump change. More next time, Punz hoped.

* * *

Two, spite.

Once upon a time, Punz used to feel spiteful. Angry, too. Sad. Betrayed. But it's kinda hard to feel betrayed when you don't have anyone *to* betray you. And maybe that was Punz's own fault, but, really, who could

fault him? The server was an active warzone six out of seven days of the week. How the hell are you supposed to keep a friendship going with someone that might stab you in the back at an Olive Garden?

Punz was no diplomat, and he never pretended to be. What he was was a mercenary, and a damn good one. No loyalties when someone can buy yours for a stack of gold pieces and a Chili's gift card.

It might have occurred to Punz once that maybe he would be the guy to stab you at an Olive Garden.

Well. So be it. You probably deserved it, anyway.

* * *

Punz had a child. He refused to think of the dead chicken at his feet as his child, but it was his child. Its head was snapped clear off its tiny body, but Punz remembered seeing it blinking up at him in its first moments of life.

The puddle the dead chick was in had long dried by the time Punz got around to visiting it.

There's something to be said about the death of a child. Your child. Punz had chicken for dinner two days ago, and he killed the chickens himself and got a pocketful of gold for his troubles. But this thing? This miserable little wretch of a dead chicken?

Punz scoffed and lightly nudged its body with the toe of his boot. His boot came away stained.

He wrinkled his nose. Fucking *gross*.

The spirit that had so *graciously* come to hang out and talk about dicks for an hour was long gone, but Punz still felt the familiar urge to dig his knife into something and not let go. If he stabbed something longer, would that give him more money in reward?

The knife on his belt twitched like it was shrugging. Punz pretended not to notice. Not his problem. Sentient capitalistic daggers were the least of his problems. He had wars to fight in, battles to decide, chickens to avenge.

Vengeance has gotten a bit complicated recently. You can't just blow someone's house up and call it a day. No, someone always has to get *pissy* about it, and that was fine by Punz's standards. He was a mercenary; his trade depended on people getting pissy. No pissy people meant no paycheck, and a life without a paycheck would be a sad one, indeed.

There was the rush of battle, the adrenaline-charged thrill of removing a motherfucker's head from their body and immediately getting a broken rib for the trouble. Punz missed his broken ribs. There wasn't enough going on to warrant a broken bone. What, the L'Manbergians were causing trouble? That was old news by that point.

War was profitable, but war was also getting just a tad bit *boring*.

A chicken war would at least be interesting.

"Cock war," Punz absently said. His voice echoed around the wilderness sounding entirely unfamiliar and too much like someone from a YouTube anti-depressant medication commercial.

He smiled at his own joke anyway and looked back down at his dead child. The little thing wasn't quite important enough to him to warrant revenge or anything, but it gave him an excuse to go and stab someone on his terms. Maybe that'd make the whole thing feel a bit more worth it.

* * *

Three, hunger.

Punz had a fridge full of leftovers. Chinese, mostly, some Chipotle. Homemade stuff. There was a veggie platter he put together for a failed Christmas dinner he was supposed to have with some friends.

That went well.

He liked food. He loved food, actually. Didn't mean his stomach wasn't empty all the time, or that he wouldn't constantly be feeling like he needed... *more*. More. His fridge was full, but his pockets were empty. He could look out the window and see Tubbo and Ranboo walking down the path with their pickaxes hitched up on their shoulders. A couple of minutes' walk away, Bad and Skeppy had their mansion. Punz had a tower, and he had a knife, and he had Dream.

And he had Dream.

Maybe hunger isn't exclusively for food. Maybe it's for something else. Like companionship. Or a Planet Fitness membership.

* * *

Punz killed a dog. Two gold coins added to the pile.

Across the growing crater that used to be New L'Manberg, the world was ending, and that was just fine. None of Punz's business. To steal a phrase, it was never meant to be. (Or something like that, anyway.)

It was weird being on this side of the war. Punz couldn't see Dream in all the chaos, but he had his orders not to look. Can't act too suspicious...

And so Punz stabbed another dog and ignored the way he wanted to cry over it. They were just stupid dogs. No big deal.

Somewhere, Tommy was screaming. In all the racket, it was hard to pick it out from every other scream of pain, fear, agony, desperation – Technoblade's triumphant rambling and Philza's relative quiet. Dream above watching silently (somehow, Punz knew that he would be looking right at wherever Tommy was.)

But that didn't concern him, so he stabbed another dog. Up to six coins now, hell yeah. He can get a Happy Meal with this kind of money. Funds were drying up with all the battle prep, but he'd be able to treat himself after the apocalypse, at least.

Idly, Punz wondered if there would be a McPuffy's left after this. He decided he didn't care.

It was a little hard to care about anything when all there was was the splash of blood against his face and the panicked screeching of a bunch of idiots running around like headless chickens.

On his way to try and take down one of the withers (how much money could a *wither* get him?), Punz tripped over a root and nearly face planted into one of the dogs that Sapnap had butchered on his way to his dumbass fiance.

It was red. The root, that is. Small, barely poking above ground. Punz stared at it for just a moment longer than he should have before snapping out of it with the sound of a wither skull being shot at his head.

He narrowly managed to dodge out of the way, landing in an awkward half-roll that sent his dagger skidding across the ground out of reach.

NO

Panicked, Punz lunged for it, scrambling around in the dirt and the bloodied mud to get it back before it got lost or (god forbid) someone *took it* from him.

He picked the knife up with both hands, lungs heaving, and, when he looked at it, his reflection in the blade was thin and sunken like a skeleton's.

His hoodie was ruined. That was fine. He could just buy a new one.

Four, fear.

Punz was not afraid of anything. He wasn't sure if he could be afraid anymore. He couldn't be much of *anything* anymore. He could be cold; his blankets had begun wearing thin, and he needed new ones before the winter got too bad. He could be wet; his umbrella broke months ago

and he never bothered replacing it, not seeing a point to when he had a hood. He could be tired; he never got enough sleep, not anymore, and even his sleep was restless thanks to the *itch* under his skin.

He slept with his knife under his pillow. The rust had long worn off, and he didn't remember when he started being able to see himself in its reflection or when the mirror over his bathroom sink shattered, but he just blamed the mirror on yet another home intrusion and called it a day.

Use Me :), the note had read, and Punz had. There was a box under his bed full of gold coins, enough to make a pirate horny or a banker cry.

And Get Your Just Rewards, indeed.

Punz sure felt rewarded. The world was silent, and he could finally sleep.

What came first, the chicken or the egg?

Punz was a chicken once. He birthed a child, even, not that he chose to think about that too often, just when he was drinking and trying to think of fun weekend vengeance plans to fill his calendar with now that his friends were all leaving to join some weird breakfast cult.

Boredom, that's what Punz could feel.

Boredom.

No wars. It was quiet. Any adrenaline was long gone. Maybe he was addicted, maybe he was going through withdrawals, but when a gigantic egg said that it could provide for him, well. It was more convincing than it would have been a couple of months ago.

Well? It asked.

"Well what?" he responded.

It looked down upon him judgmentally. A heavy feeling settled on Punz's shoulders, one he didn't like. It felt like hands curling, claws digging in. Into his skin, into his flesh, into his *soul*. (He didn't even realize he still had one of those. He thought he lost it months ago when he first picked up that knife and his eyes were opened to the world for the very first time.)

Punz was alone. Bad had escorted him down and had left with only a smile and a wink and a pat on the shoulder. It wasn't really anything out of the ordinary for Bad, honestly, but something about it left Punz on edge.

And then the Egg started talking.

What are you waiting for? the Egg asked. Its smile curled around Punz's brain and squeezed.

He didn't realize he was raising his dagger until he saw its blade glinting in the dim red light.

The Egg liked him, It had said. It heard all about him already from previous visitors. It had seen him Itself, because It sees everything. Knows everything. Is everything.

Punz wanted chaos, It had determined.

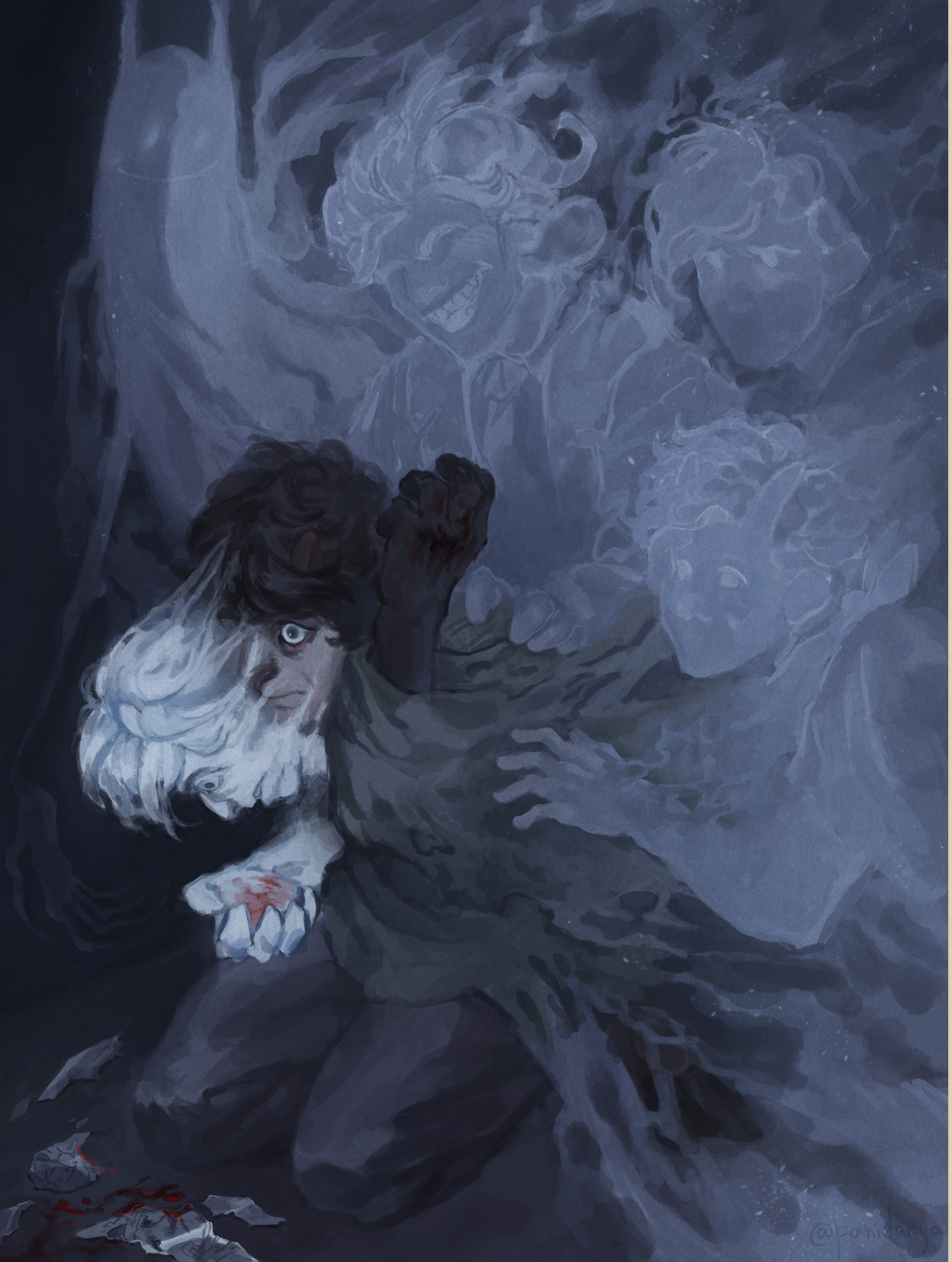
No, Punz wanted to argue. He wanted the money that just so happened to come from chaos. He wanted a cure to his boredom.

(He wanted to feel again, he didn't say. That would be *embarrassing*.)

All the Egg needed was a show of loyalty. It couldn't just accept *any* old merc off the street. It had to know he was being serious, and there was only one way of doing that.

The dagger shook with anticipation, level with his chest, aimed right towards where he distantly remembered his heart being back when he still had one. Punz stared his own reflection right in the eyes. His reflection was smiling; he was not.

The knife plunged in, and Punz bled gold.



The Boy and his Ghosts

THERE ARE MANY different types of ghosts, from benevolent to malevolent, from those that are merely mischievous to those that are outright dangerous. Some people believe that ghosts are the souls of the dead that are unable to move on to the afterlife, while others believe that they are simply figments of people's imaginations.

Regardless of what you believe, it is best to stay informed. You never know what you might come across. This work's goal is to familiarize whoever might pick it up with what we tend to ignore. Keep your eyes peeled. Do not expect an objective encyclopedia. Ghosts are tailored to each and every one of us, and I am writing this based on my own research and experience. I will bring revisions to widely accepted categories and definitions as I see fit.

As a broad definition, ghosts are representations of what is left behind. There are many theories as to what, exactly, that would be. It could be a piece of the soul, or some unknown essence that every living being has. Some people think that it's simply want that is left behind—the living had such a strong need that it did not die with them. It could be any of these, none of them, or all of them at once. I, personally, am not willing to die to find out which it is. I will say, however, that I am rather partial to the interpretation that they all coexist—in either of these cases, a ghost will form.

Throughout this guide, I will be using illustrations to better explain the points. Pay close attention to them. We will be following a boy and his ghosts, who is also, coincidentally, an example of what not to do, should you come across a ghost. Try to spot the mistakes; I will address them near the end.

If you feel like further examples are needed, or you are simply curious, I recommend *The President in the Mirror & Other Ghost Stories*.

If we have to start somewhere, starting with the ghosts of the dead is a good place. There are several subsections:

i. Ghosts of the old dead

The old dead are commonly defined as: "Those who were no longer alive, but now are." This definition is convoluted and counterintuitive. As I will showcase later on, there are different subsections of people who were dead, but now aren't. For the sake of this section, we will take it to mean people who died when it was not their time and came back almost instantly. These ghosts are generally more shadow-like, as their source, if you will, is not dead anymore. They're simply a leftover snippet of what was left behind. They should fade away soon enough (they are usually only seen once, though they can last for a week or two). If they stick around after that, you might have to consider the possibility that the people they are a ghost of are not quite alive or that you, yourself, have left something behind.

It starts, as many things do, with a betrayal—a sword through the back. The boy-soldier wakes up, head pounding. His hands are cold, and he rubs them together to warm them up. The thing about respawning is that it leaves you with a chill that won't leave, as if a part of the void nestled right next to your heart. Or, rather, as if you've left something behind. He swears he sees ghosts, dancing in the corners of his vision. He blinks one-two-three times, and one of them flashes him a grin and a salute before disappearing. It's wearing a tricorn hat.

This is not enough, of course. Those who are foolhardy enough to keep going after dying will die again. So, not long after, there is a situation involving duels, and a ghost with a starburst-shaped scar right on its forehead. Its hand passes right through his, and the boy shivers.

Festivals are something like a bad omen, and this is no different. The once-a-soldier-now-a-spy-boy is discovered, and if there's something the second president doesn't like, it's a double-cross. It ends with a bang, quite literally, and not as painlessly as was promised. He wakes up somewhere cold and humid, where the ceilings hang low and there's a slow, constant drip-drip of water. Maybe that's the stalactites forming. There's a ghost of himself in the corner, its skin sloughing off its face. He doesn't sleep much.

ii. Ghosts of the present dead

These are the more "traditional" ghosts, if you will. If you come up to someone in the street and ask them what they think a ghost is, they would name these. (Not an experiment to repeat, however. You *will* get side-eyed.) Because of this widespread familiarity, they are the most known, and the most researched. Consequently, I do not have any revisions to offer in this area. I believe that I do not have to explain what the present dead are. These ghosts are more likely to appear if you witnessed the death, or if you were particularly close to the deceased. They stick around longer than the ghosts of the past dead, but they usually do fade after a few months. Some *have* been documented as simply not leaving. Do not get used to them if this happens. They will grow complacent.

The boy spends the entirety of the battle looking over his shoulder. When he steps up to the podium after the fact—this boy-no-more is a president; keep this in mind—there's a heavy hand clamped on his shoulders, keeping him in place. This time, he doesn't look back.

Both previous presidents are dead. This does not bode well for him. Based on their closeness of occupation, it is no surprise that he finds them lurking around his place of work. The first ghost (of the second president—I will admit that this discrepancy bothers me, but we can't all have what we want) is omnipresent, yes, but simply a presence and nothing more. Heavy hands resting on shoulders, gripping a bit too tightly. Echoes in the corridors. He doesn't tell anyone about it.

However, the second ghost (of the first president) is seen by everyone. You could almost trick yourself into thinking that he's alive, were it not for the discoloured skin and the propensity for melting under the rain. The boy (or man, as he likes to think of himself; I stick to the facts) is relieved that he does not have to hide it. The old president is harmless, and wanders around looking a little bit lost. They all get used to him.

The president has a minutes man, and this minutes man dies. When he dies, he doesn't call himself a minutes man anymore, but the president will always be a president. It stands to reason that the minutes man, by sticking to the president, has cast his lot with him. It is not easy to be separated from such titles. But let's not get lost in the details. The important thing is this: the minutes man died (in one fell swoop—it didn't even take a minute), and he left a ghost. This ghost is in same vein as the ghost of the first president—everyone can see him. This ghost, however, practically flaunts his death, in the beginning. The president throws out the flowers left on his windowsill, and the fresh ones he finds every next day.

iii. Ghosts of the past dead

This section is one that I, myself, have come up with, after meticulous research. The difference between the "old dead" and the "past dead" is this: the old dead are those who died when it was not their time, and have come back (relatively; I am not interested in arguing about the semantics of this) whole. The past dead, however, are those who have died completely and fully. They might have spent a certain amount of time in the afterlife. But, they have come back. They *were* dead. They are not anymore, but you cannot call them fully alive, either. They've left something behind. Such rebellion against nature cannot go unpunished. This is why I do not include them in the old dead. Their ghosts last longer than those of the old dead, but not as long as those of the present dead. They do usually fade away after the dead come back, but sometimes they stick around, depending on how much the ones that were left behind clung to them.

Note: Through my research, I have determined that there is not a great difference between the ghosts of the present dead and the ghosts of the past dead if the person has been dead for long enough (half a year and more seems to be the average).

The old president comes back, and his ghost disappears. The boy-president-no-longer thinks that the old president might be a ghost himself, no matter how much he crows about being alive, about sunrises and sunsets. He's too bright and feverish to be fully there.

The first president's right-hand man dies, after everything is over and done with. I'll spare you the details, but it ends with blood splattered on obsidian, hissing from the heat. When the boy-president-no-more hears the news, his first thought is: I can't do this again. The second one is: I need to hold another funeral. The third one is: I can't tell if this ghost is new, or not. When he comes back (and he does, he always will—) there is a melding, of sorts. Boy and ghost, ghost and boy. They both have bloody teeth.

This marks the end of the section on ghosts of the dead. The following categories are more miscellaneous in nature.

Ghosts of the missing

Then, you have the ghosts of the missing. If the ghosts of the dead fit in the label of "missing" is a hotly debated topic. I, personally, find it reductive to fit them all in one category. The missing always have a chance of coming back, after all.

The first president and his right-hand man get exiled by the second president—who has apparently not heard of keeping his enemies close. The boy is commanded to go find them, but he doesn't—what he does find are footprints. He scuffs them up with his shoe and goes back. As soon as he does, he gets appointed secretary of state, all very cursory-like. He swears on a random book that got pulled out of the first president's bookshelf. There is someone behind him, this he knows. Sometimes, he thinks he can hear the sounds of old living. The first president talking to himself in his office, and the right-hand man's voice, loud enough to be heard through his window.

As previously stated, the first and second president both die. The right-hand man, however, gets exiled a second time, this time by our very own president. I'd call that a pattern of behaviour. Maybe even a curse. Curses, however, are a completely different topic (I recommend Cursed, Hexed or Vexed: A guide to magical malignments*). The president goes about his duties—meetings and papers and more meetings—missing him like a lost limb (it aches like one, too). There's something sitting in on every meeting. It doesn't offer any solutions,* *so it's a little useless. He takes a long time to make up his mind and visit, but when he does, the ghost-of-the-missing doesn't go away. It grows more and more opaque, until he can see the outline of the right-hand man (or his best friend, you choose which narrative you prefer) haloed against a tower of piled-up dirt that goes up, and up, and up.*

The third president-no-more has a son. Not a boy anymore, is he? After playing the leader, he's well acquainted with leverage, and it being used against him. He still wasn't expecting it to reach its hands into his home. He keeps thinking he's in his room. He'll climb up, and creak open the door, waiting for the pitter-patter of hooves running towards him. It never comes, and the bed gathers dust. Every time he's in the kitchen, he swears he can hear laughter. He stops running upstairs by the third time, and he makes eggs for three.

Ghosts of oneself

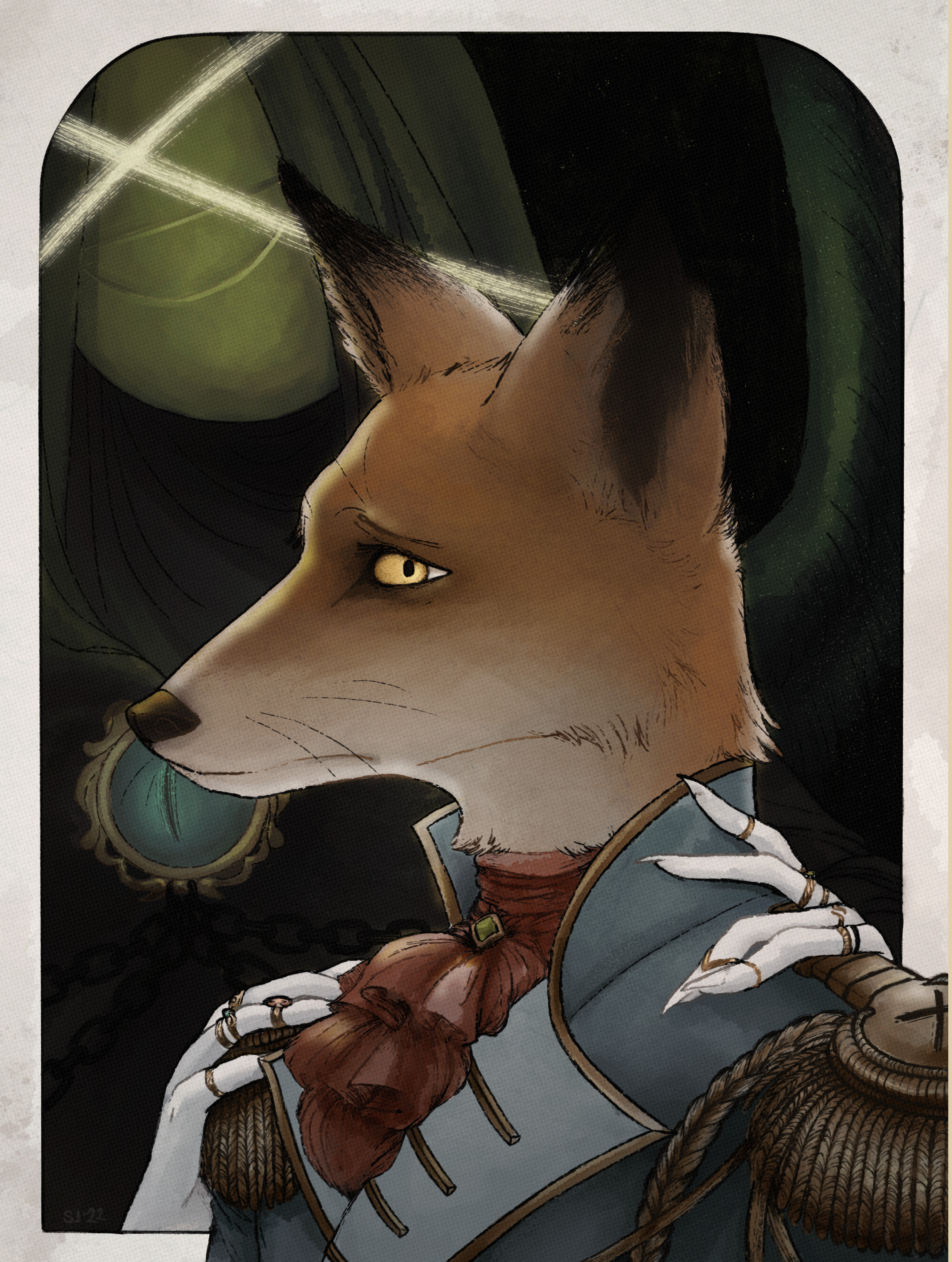
Lastly, you will find the ghosts of oneself. These are widely divided in the same categories as the ghosts of the dead: the old dead, and the present dead. However, I would propose a new category: ghosts of the living. I believe that it is possible to be haunted by ghosts of yourself when you have not died physically.

Among all of these past and present ghosts, interspersed between them, are the ghosts of the boy-soldier-spy-president-no-more. He's alive, of course. He's just killed and remade himself so many times that there has to be something that sags and gives out. So, there's a ghost playing outside, laughing. There's a soldier guarding the perimeter. There's a spy, standing in the corners with his eyes flicking back and forth, back and forth. There's a president flipping through papers in the study, waiting for a meeting.

Once one has been acquainted—no matter how surface level it may be—with the world of ghosts, the next thing to know would be how to deal with them. This is not the point of this little guide (I recommend flipping through *Haunted: Seven steps to cleanse your home* for that), but I will offer some pointers, based on the examples given.

1. Do not get used to them. It is a sure-fire way to make sure they stick around.
2. Do not think of them as a monolith. All ghosts are different, and building up expectations is sure to come back and haunt you. Wordplay intended.
3. Do not forget the living. They have more to offer than you might think.

Ghosts don't make for a full house. They're around every corner, reaching out their hands to snag on his clothing. Here's the thing: he was always going to die. His body just hasn't caught up, yet. How long can you be surrounded by ghosts until you start fading?



The fox who traveled to the end of the world

DURING THE DAY the fox wandered the open world, rounding all the paths he had walked every day before, from the desert to the plains, he traced the lip of the gaping cavity where he used to live. Sometimes he stumbled on old friends and they would converse. Most times, he walked alone.

At night, the fox would curl up in his den of blankets, and he would dream.

It was on his first cicada year, in the height of humid summer with insects singing loudly from every tree and brush, that Fundy first dreamed of the fires. This was before the land caved in on itself, before all the salmon swam upstream for the last time, before his father stopped loving him. In his sleep, Fundy first felt the wave of heat break against him. His eyes watered from the foaming warmth that crawled through the crevices of his face and he shut his eyes on instinct. When he opened them again he saw the sky turn gray, then a violent, apocalyptic magenta. The walls of his home had been reduced to pulsing embers. The river ran red and choked.

Fundy woke quietly from that dream, like he did all the other ones—dreams where he is trapped in a small box with four black and screaming walls, between the narrow opening of two slate cliffs, trudging through the snow while his boots trail blood. The bedroom had stayed dark and still before his blinking eyes.

It would come back, that one, even when the other dreams left as they came to pass.

Whatever he had seen, again and again as the years dredged on, sat waiting at the edge of his foresight. At first its colossus-shadow could barely touch Fundy—the morning after that first dream he'd come out of his room to languid daylight and a warm breakfast and the last of the unease had been pushed aside to disintegrate by the time he went outside to play.

Eventually, though, that peace would change as his home did. The walls came down and Fundy moved houses and L'Manberg buckled beneath his feet. And at night, there would be fire and streams of crimson and smoke on the wind, on the trees, everywhere he tried to turn to. This sort of thing troubled Fundy, who did not wish to witness any more destruction than he'd already had, so one day he got up and journeyed west to the castle between this time and the next, where lived a great god of dream and chaos.

He passed through forests where all the branches stretched bare and bony, no matter how the seasons changed, and grasslands littered with ditches and patches of red flowers, petals rippling in the wind like water. Fundy forged forward, until he came to an endless desert. The heat was ruthless, crashing unimpeded on the sand. Under the sun, Fundy felt like a torch flare, a tiny writhing blaze of orange and white. By night, the fox found old burrows to sleep in. Dry and empty dens that scraped against Fundy's paws but would, at least, shield him from the cold winds outside. Whatever lived in these dens were long gone and the fox curled up inside the tight links of their fossilized bones.

The fox felt his legs begin to give way as he rounded off his first month of traveling. The terrain had risen from arid, hard earth to towering dunes, each cresting like tidal waves over the horizon and crashing down again as the ground began to level off. Little swirls of dust blew about Fundy's ankles.

Fundy looked ahead, praying with each step that his destination was in sight. Soon enough, the distant silhouette of some grand structure appeared behind the hazy sunlight, growing larger and larger. By midday, the fox came up to the structure. He walked through the tiny metropolis, surrounded by pyramids and statues and sandstone arches gilded with gold and dazzling minerals. Artwork adorned each surface, complex tessellations and mosaics depicting stories the fox was unfamiliar with. They were stories of battle, tragedy, and love. Shining lapis lovers locked in embrace, a shark-like creature calling down lighting in silver plate, a soldier weeping a lake of tears over the body of his fallen comrade.

"This must be the place I seek," thought the fox, marveling. "Who else would build such magnificent things?"

Eventually he came up to the center of the buildings, where a golden man was hanging sea lanterns on the arm of his newest statue. He was gigantic and would have blotted out the sun if the gold of his skin did not reflect the light so well, casting stark beams all around him. Two scraped stumps protruded from his back where feathers had once sprouted in abundance.

"Hello, are you the god of dream and chaos that lives in a castle far in the west?" The golden man was so tall that Fundy had to strain for his voice to reach the man's ears.

The golden man paused and set down the last of his sea lanterns with a delicate hand, peering through emeralds at the little fox below him. His movements were accompanied by the click and hum of gears and springs.

"I am not the one you seek," Foolish answered. "I am Foolish, totem of life and maker of beautiful things. I know whom you speak of, though."

"Can you point me in his direction?"

Foolish thought for a moment. "You look tired. Stay a night, and I'll tell you what I know of the god of dream and chaos."

Fundy wanted to reach his destination as soon as possible, but he was tired—his throat was scratchy and his legs ached and the heat was pressing at his temples in the form of a throbbing headache, so he agreed. Foolish led the fox to the cool shade of one of his beautiful terraces and gave him water to drink and food to eat.

"You are my guest now," he declared. "It has been a long time since I have received guests in my home, but I suppose it does me good to see a fresh face once in a while. Tell me, what of the land you came from? Why have you set yourself on such an arduous journey, little fox?"

"My home has been beset by a string of tragedies," said Fundy. "It has seen war and betrayal and grief. Even the earth has flayed itself, spilling its soil-dark guts for all to see. I have seen yet another catastrophe on the horizon, one I fear my home may not survive, and now I go to ask the god of dream and chaos to stop it."

"Though honorable, it is a lofty goal that you reach for. The god you speak of will not be easily swayed to action. The goings of mortals escape him. I met the guy once, y'know, and he was pretty serious about everything. It took me forever to get a boon from him." Foolish pointed to a statue, taller than all the rest. "I had to build him that, and he was real picky about it."

"I am not a builder, and certainly not one capable of creating things as wonderful as you. I am only a fox. What could I have to offer?"

"I couldn't tell you!" Foolish said cheerfully. "But the god is versatile, and so are the ways to convince him. Finish your journey, little fox. Enter the hall of the god of dream and chaos and make your petition. His nature will be beyond you, but if he's vain enough for a statue, you may find a way to appeal to his pride too."

"Perhaps," the fox said. "I may have come on a fool's errand. Perhaps I should turn back."

"Don't be like that. Your judgment will clear come morning. In the meantime, I will tell you stories of the god of dream and chaos if you tell me the stories of your home and how it came to such ruin."

The fox agreed and so, for many hours, he recounted his memories of his father: the songs he'd sing, their afternoons at the bay, and what little he knew of the ravine. His tale of descent echoed in the seaborn heart of the golden man, who found himself swayed.

When the morning came, Foolish stopped the fox before he could leave.

"The second leg of your journey will be harder than the last but I will see to it that you find your god," he promised. Foolish brought out a spool of white filament, glossy as spring water, and offered it to Fundy. "Take this magic thread and tie it around your finger, pull on it when distance or barrier seeks to keep you from your destination, and you will escape it like thread through fabric, memory through the souls of men."

The fox bid farewell to the golden man, thanking him for his gifts and hospitality, and went on his way, traveling for another month before the desert finally came to an end. Here, the land lifted in chunks off the ground like the walls of a cliff, if the cliff were missing patches of itself, the empty space crossing through the stone in vein-like patterns. Fundy knew for sure now that he had reached the place between this time and the next.

He walked into the empty gaps and found himself submerged in darkness, though he had only taken three steps in from the desert. After three more steps, the fox stepped out into a courtyard of white marble, across which was a marble castle. He passed under swoops of buttresses and willowy pillars, until at last he found himself in the hall of the god.

"Who are you that enters my domain?" asked the god, in a voice that echoed the airy rumble of solar flares and collapsing stars. "Name your intent."

The fox bowed. "God of dream and chaos, who lives across a mighty desert in a palace at the end of time, I have foreseen each disaster that came to the doorstep of my home and watched it pass without complaint, but this time I can no longer step aside. In my dreams I saw the sky had changed color and the river had become blood. I saw that everything had burned, so I come to you now, after two months of travel through the desert, to plead with you to divert this fate."

"You would ask me to reach my hand into the make of the universe and pull at its threads? Who are you to make this request of me?"

Fundy thought he heard a cruel slash of mirth in the god's voice, if there was any space in the cosmic shuddering of his voice for such a mortal thing. It trembled through every hair on the fox's head and he went very still, the way all animals do when they're faced with something exponentially greater and stranger—fear with less bite and more venom. Fundy did not bolt, however. Instead, he cleared his throat once and chose his next words carefully, remembering what the golden man had told him.

"Oh, but you must know who I am," Fundy began. "I may appear to you as a small and harmless fox, but I am a fast and far wandering spirit; my mother is the inevitable sea and my grandmother is encroaching

Death. None can stop me—no gate will bar me passage, no man can keep me away.”

“A bold claim you make,” the god remarked. “But you cannot escape the clutch of time. For that is what I am—the slow unraveling of sense. Every passing season is measured in decay, the force to which everything will eventually fold. The corpse will corrode and the ocean will one day be only salt. None can elude me and therefore, none can sway me.”

“It’s true, here—I will make you a bet, if you are so confident of yourself. Catch me, and I’ll concede and carry out your ruinous work. Should you fail, though, then I win and you will grant me my request.”

XD’s pride sharpened like a supernova. “Very well, since you really wish to be so foolish.”

The fox turned tail and ran, leading the god of dream and chaos all through the alabaster of the god’s palace. No matter how fast the god was, Fundy would slip through his fingers each time. When the god tried to raise a wall of glistening pearl to stop the fox in his tracks, Fundy tugged on the thread, thinking of the people who had been his friends before the war, and passed over the towering slate as easily as breath.

Their bet continued out in the labyrinth of jagged stone masses that surrounded the god’s domain. Fundy tugged on the thread, remembering the smoky afternoon he watched a man’s heart give way in his home, and navigated through the system with ease.

It’s hard to say how long the two of them kept it up but this far in the west, time does not move the same way. They ran through the present and the future and the past and then circled back, until the god finally relented, begrudgingly.

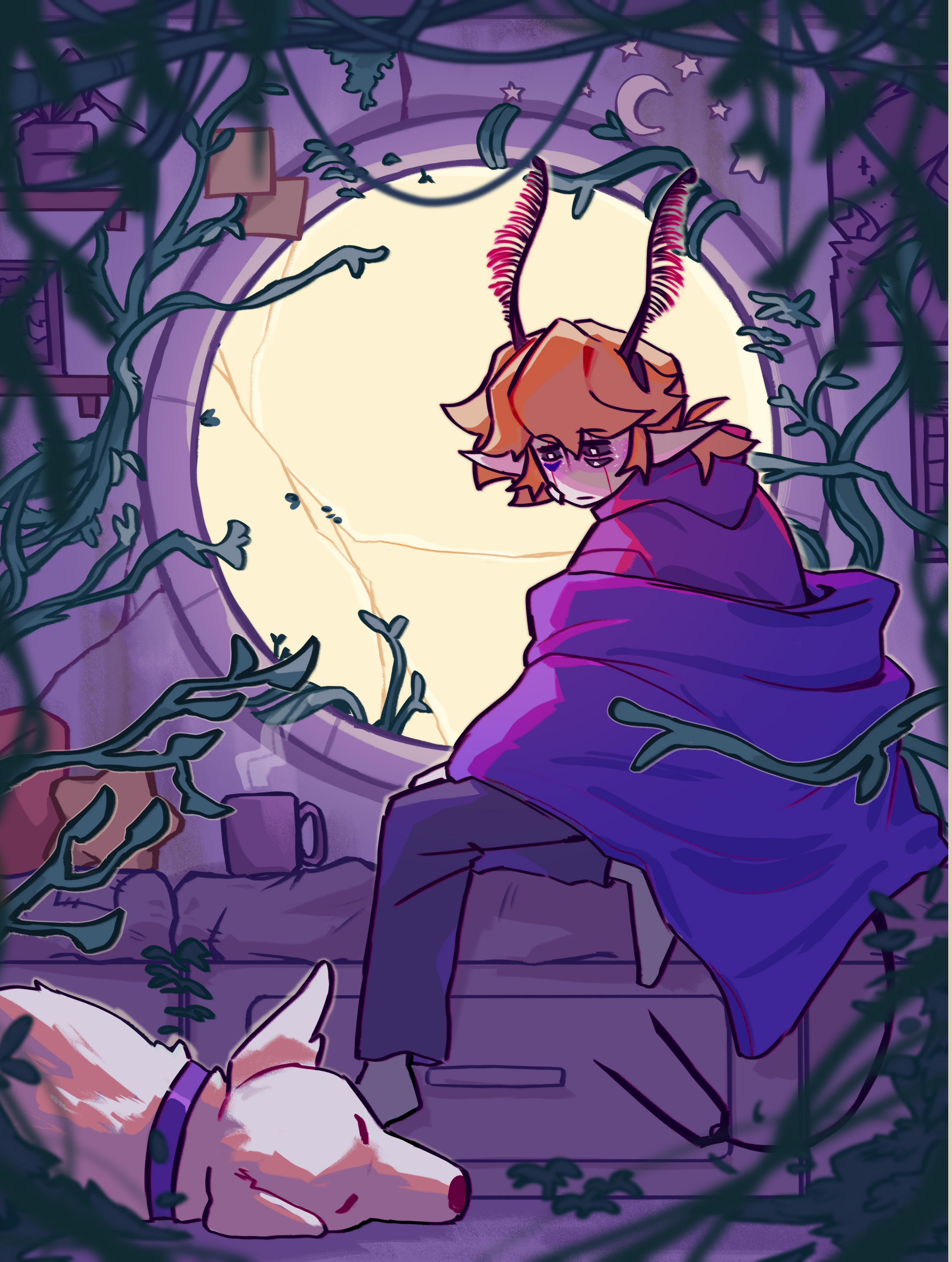
“You have won this day, little fox.”

True to his word, the god pulled free the weft of calamity that the fox had foreseen. Fundy rejoiced, having accomplished his goal after so many troubles. In his excitement, the fox let the god catch sight of the spool in his hand as he turned to leave. The god, in his well-deep knowledge, saw the magic of the thread.

Enraged at having been cheated, the god cast his hand yet again. He could not undo what Fundy had already gotten him to do—to turn back, to restore was against the very nature of this god whose only path was falling forward—but he could twist the future.

“If you will not be caught, overrun, contained by any other force, then let you keep yourself. Stay within your memory until the day the ocean dries,” the god declared, shifting the warp of things-to-come.

And so the fox walked out into the desert, thinking to go home. He slept, dreamlessly, for the first time in a long time, and woke up in the van he knew so well from his childhood, which he still haunts to this day.



alien blues

PURPLED COULDN'T REMEMBER the last time he saw another server member. Before, he would've taken that as a blessing. Purpled wasn't a *people* person, so the less he saw of others, the better. People annoyed him. Confused him. Angered him. He didn't like this world–why should he? It wasn't where he was supposed to be. It wasn't where he was born, and if he had anything to say about it, it wouldn't be where he died, either. He promised himself it was only a temporary setback, something he'd ditch the second he could. Something he wouldn't gain attachments to, because he'd just have to leave them at some point, so what was the point?

He broke that promise, in the end.

Being anti-social wasn't a bother to him. It was a bigger deal on his home planet, where he had people he actually cared about and a life he actually liked living; but now, stuck as he was, he found he didn't care much when it came to putting himself out there socially. He had Dogchamp to talk to, and that was more than enough. He listened better than nearly half the server anyways. Purpled was content in his isolation.

"You should get out more," Hannah had always told him, back when she'd drag him and Boomer over for lunch every weekend. She was insistent that it'd be the only way they would all hang out, as Purpled certainly wouldn't organize anything otherwise, and Boomer was far too disorganized to. She was right, of course, but Purpled always rolled his eyes in annoyance anyways, insisting it wasn't true, and he got the perfect amount of socialization, thank you very much. It just happened that his definition of "perfect" meant "as little as possible". He never objected to it, though, even though he knew very well Hannah would relent with enough pushing. "You'll never meet anyone if you stay cooped up in that bunker of yours all day. You can't just stay a hermit all your life."

"Yeah," Boomer would add, voice booming through whatever he had in his mouth at the time, "a growing boy needs to socialize every day, or else he won't grow. Hey, maybe that's why you're so short!"

And Purpled would object then, maybe leap over the table and try to grab at Boomer in some way, with his hands or a butter knife or whatever he could find. Hannah would interfere, as she always did, yelling at them to not break any of her teacups or else she'd beat both of their asses. Purpled would pull back, knowing very well that Hannah was one of the few people that could live up to such promise, and Boomer would laugh in such a booming way that Purpled was instantly reminded where they got their name. Hannah would get angry, insisting she was serious, and her tone would just make Boomer laugh harder, until she lost her own patience and repeated Purpled's earlier lunge at the man. Except Hannah always wore looser clothing than him, and her skirt or top or jacket would snag on something on the table and knock it all over, causing tea cups and plates and biscuits to shatter all over her floorboards. The three of them would go quiet, just for a second, before Boomer would laugh again, and Hannah would get so frustrated she'd start laughing along, and Purpled would try to stifle his own amusement behind his hand or whatever of his plate survived, but the two would always make an unnecessarily big deal of pointing out how funny he thought it all was.

And so it would go. Small details would change, here and there. Sometimes Hannah caught herself. Sometimes Boomer was smart enough to bite their tongue. Sometimes Purpled wasn't able to catch his plate on time, and had to suffer the loss of a good meal alongside them. The meetings blended into each other, one after another, unequivocally mundane in their cycle. A part of him wished he paid more attention. A part of him was glad he didn't.

Purpled didn't think about those days too much anymore. He did miss them, to an extent. It was different, though, than the usual feeling of loss that had settled itself in his chest. The loss of his planet, his home, his people. That was something perpetually out of his reach, at least as long as his ship was in the state that it was, something he didn't even know *when* he'd be able to get back to, if at all. (He *had* to get back. He would never be able to live with himself if he failed.) Boomer and

Hannah were a tangible loss. A temporary one, even. At any point, he could leave his UFO, walk down the Prime Path, and find himself at Hannah's front door. At any point, he could take the Nether highway and wander through Boomer's portal and into their swamp. They were gone, but within reach. He wasn't used to a loss like that. He wasn't quite sure how to feel.

Despite how often their meetings blended in their mind, he could remember *that* day like he could remember nothing else. He was certain he could never forget it, even if he tried. It hung over him like a phantom, painfully loud in the permanent existence it'd taken up in his mind.

It had just been him and Hannah. Boomer was out with Sam, or maybe Ant, or possibly Foolish. Purpled didn't ask. He never did, looking back. They'd been mid-brunch when Hannah put her teacup down, hands shaking slightly as she did so. Purpled had noticed it instantly–of course he had, he'd always been able to notice everything about them both–looking up from his meal to meet stony green eyes. The flowers in her braid were starting to wilt, ever-so-slightly, mere shades darker than their usual hues. She looked like she hadn't been sleeping, and if she had, they hadn't been restful nights.

"Purpled, why don't you ever want to hang out with us?" she began, as calm and collected as she ever was, unrelenting as she bore holes into his person. "You never invite us over, and whenever we *do* drag you out, it always feels like you're unhappy to be there. Like you literally want to be anywhere but with us. Do you actually just not like us? Do you just put up with us for the sake of it?" Hannah had begun to spiral into a ramble, as she tended to do when her thoughts went uninterrupted for too long, her previously held-together composure crumbling with each word. She'd clasped her hands together to disguise their shaking, but it barely helped, as her voice shook enough for them.

Purpled had shrugged, noncommittally, thinking it wasn't that big of a deal. It wasn't that big of a deal, not to him, not at the time. He'd assumed Hannah and Boomer were on the same level that he was at. While he did like their presence, it wasn't something he'd seek out. They were nice and all, yeah, but Purpled was a loner before all else. He was a *drifter* before all else. “I mean, uh, kinda. I mean, I *like* you guys, but if I had a choice, I’d probably just stay home, y’know? No hard feelings.”

“You don’t care about us.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement. The roses in her hair had fully wilted, by now, and he nearly wanted to reach over and pluck them out. She didn’t look right without them blooming. It bothered him. He didn’t know why.

“Well, I’m gonna go back home at some point. Like, actual home, not just my UFO, and I can’t necessarily take you guys along. S’kinda easier that way.”

“You’re such a dick,” Hannah had said, genuine anger lacing her voice. Purpled didn’t think he’d ever seen her that angry, even when Boomer broke her favorite vase, or when Squid tore her impostor stuffed animal. He didn’t understand why she was so angry. He’d be a little annoyed, maybe, if someone had said that to him, but his reasoning was sound. If he got attached, if they grew *close* close, he’d have to abandon that all when he finally went home. It was mutually beneficial this way. “Is that really how you see us? Just as a stupid fucking pit-stop for you to abandon one day?”

“Sorry,” he’d replied, but there was no real meaning behind it. “I wouldn’t call it a pit-stop, but yeah, I’m gonna leave one day or another. Vanish completely from this world, and whatnot. I’ve told you this before.”

“You know what? Yeah, whatever. If that’s how you see it, fuck you! Disappear for all I care! If that’s how you see it, so fucking be it!” Hannah had bolted upright, her chair sliding halfway across the room before getting caught on a loose floorboard and falling over with a loud slam. She’d pushed the table forward with her jolting, smacking it into Purpled’s torso and sending pastries and tea scattering everywhere. Purpled didn’t dare to move, eyes locked with Hannah’s as she stared down at him. He’d never felt small in her presence before, despite their height difference, but looking into her eyes, he finally understood why his ancestors feared fire, despite all the warmth that it had brought them.

Something in the air changed, then. Hannah’s shoulders slumped, almost in defeat, and he could almost feel something snap between them. She’d given up her anger, given up on the argument, given up on . . . him? He wasn’t sure what exactly. There was a clear shift, though, a lull in conversation that might never get picked up again. The air buzzed beneath his fingertips, the same way it always did when he tinkered with his ship’s core, or when the effects of an especially strong potion would kick in. Everything felt wrong, and he wasn’t sure if there was any way of fixing it. He’d already apologized, or at least explained himself, so adding anything wouldn’t help. Besides, he didn’t want to make Hannah any more upset than she already was, and his tongue felt like cotton in his mouth for reasons he couldn’t understand.

He left without another word, back to his UFO and back to his isolation. He didn’t try to contact Hannah. Was he giving her space? Wanting *her* to apologize first? He didn’t know. Either way, he spent the next few weeks camped out in his UFO. Maybe the next few months? He was never good at keeping track of the dates on this planet. He would come down, once in a while, to tend to his crops near his cabin, letting Dogchamp run laps around the lake as he worked. His and Hannah’s argument played back in his mind, every once in a while, despite his best wishes. Had she told Boomer, and was that why they hadn’t contacted him, either? He thought Boomer, out of all people, would understand–they were trying to get home, too, in the end. Maybe not, though, considering the other’s radio silence.

Purpled knew, eventually, he’d have to go into town again. He needed more supplies for his reactor, plus, he was running low on Dogchamp’s food, and he’d made the mistake of feeding him only the highest quality dog food, so now he refused to eat anything of lower quality. Which was fair in theory, as Dogchamp deserved nothing but the best, but annoying in execution, as it meant he’d actually have to step back into town. He wasn’t avoiding Hannah, per se. Running into her again just didn’t seem favorable. She hadn’t reached out to him yet, even after all this time, so he wagered she was *far* more upset with him than he’d initially thought. He wasn’t sure he was willing to face all that yet.

L’Targay had been empty when he’d popped in, which was to be expected. Puffy never was quite as good of a businesswoman as he.

Nevertheless, he respected the grind. Dropping off four diamonds at the cash register–one per bag of dog food–he made quick work of things. If he was lucky, he'd be in and out quickly enough that no one would see him, much less Hannah. Most people didn't tend to question his whereabouts. Most people likely didn't *know* of them, which meant they likely didn't know of their argument. Still, he knew how quickly rumours spread on such a small server. Encountering someone who *did* know about what happened, and who would *certainly* stop to ask him questions, was not something he was in the mood for.

Purpled was never really lucky.

He nearly bumped into Tubbo on his way out of L'Targay's front doors. Tubbo, who looked much different from the last time Purpled saw him. Tubbo, who'd grown out his hair, whose horns had grown new spirals, whose scars had healed exponentially faster than Purpled had ever seen anything of their severity heal like. That would've been the most confusing part of their meeting if it hadn't felt like Tubbo had nearly walked right through him. He couldn't have, of course. That made no sense. Purpled had just dodged right in time, barely able to get out of the other's way. It wasn't like Tubbo to just nearly steamroll someone. Had Hannah dragged his name through the mud while he was gone? Had his reputation *actually* tanked that hard?

"Tubbo, what the fuck, man?" he asked, spinning around to face the taller, but Tubbo hadn't even stopped. He'd ignored Purpled's presence entirely, Purpled's *call* entirely, continuing to make his way into the store without a care in the world. "Hey, Tubbo? Long time no see?"

Nothing.

That wasn't right. With a frown, Purpled jogged back over to Tubbo's side, reaching out a hand to wave in front of the other's face. It was a childish gesture, but if Tubbo refused to acknowledge him any other way, he would *definitely* react to something so abrupt.

Except he didn't. Purpled watched as Tubbo kept walking, *through* his arm and hand and further into the store. What the fuck? Purpled pinched himself, just to see if this was just some shitty, shitty nightmare, but the sharp sting he felt was too real to be anything else. What the fuck was going on? He tried to keep his head straight as he turned his back to Tubbo and ran out of L'Targay, but nothing he could come up with could calm his rushing heartbeat. Dogchamp was waiting outside, right where he'd left him, and being able to slump over and bury himself into his fur helped a bit, but he knew moping would get him nowhere. Something was wrong, and he had to get to the bottom of it, *now*.

His first thought was to reach out to Ponk or Boomer for help. There was *no* way what was going on wasn't some sort of magic, and those two knew far more about the subject than he. But when he tried to message either of them, his communicator greeted him with nothing but an error message. Shit. Weighing his odds, he decided to try to find Boomer first, as he was the most likely candidate to actually be at his base. Ponk was a nomad more often than not, but Boomer was meticulous with taking care of their home. At one point or another, they'd have to return there, if they weren't already hovering around. It was a risk Purpled was willing to take, if not just for the fact that he *had* no other options.

(He couldn't go to Hannah's. He couldn't face her still, especially not now.)

He traveled to Boomer's in record pace. Despite not having any gold equipped, the piglins left him alone as he ran through the Nether highway. None of the ghasts he encountered had bothered shooting at him, either, continuing their aimless floating through the ashen landscape. In any other situation, he'd consider it a blessing that nothing was attacking him, for once. Currently, though, it felt like nothing but a curse. Is that what he was, now? Cursed? Even if that wasn't the technical truth, it sure felt like it.

Thankfully, he'd been correct in his speculation. Boomer was right where he'd expected them to be, knee-deep in swamp water as they tended to a clump of roe in the water.

"Boomer, thank fuck!" Purpled called out, unable to hide the exhaustion and relief on his face as his friend started making his way over to his portal. "Tubbo just straight-up passed through me earlier, and all the mobs have been ignoring me, and I don't know what's going on–"

"Aw, doggy!" Boomer interrupted, instantly squatting down to pet Dogchamp, who didn't hesitate to leap onto Boomer and nearly send him stumbling to the ground. Boomer laughed, reaching up to adjust their hat as Dochamp licked at their face, as he always did. Dogchamp had always preferred Boomer over most of Purpled's other acquaintances. Purpled felt something shatter inside him. What little hope he had left that things were okay and that what happened earlier had been a fluke, some figment of his imagination that ran wild was gone, replaced with a chilling terror that reufsed to stop crawling up his spine. "What's up, boy? You get lost or something? How'd you get here, huh?"

No, Purpled wanted to scream. *No, he's not, I'm right here, why can't you see that?*

But he knew it wouldn't be of use. If Boomer hadn't seen him already, hadn't heard his calling, he certainly wouldn't now. He just stared, fingertips numb, as the reality of the situation kicked in. He didn't know what that reality was, exactly, but he knew that whatever life he had before, he'd never be able to return to it again. He had lost it all. *Again*.

"Huh?" Boomer stopped, suddenly, sitting back and looking up towards his hat. Purpled called for Dogchamp to halt his greeting, which he did, instantly sitting back and awaiting his owner's next instruction. Whatever Boomer had just picked up on, he didn't want to interrupt them. "What are you talking about, hat? There's no one here. Unless you mean his owner's somewhere around–"

A shiver ran down Purpled's spine. While Boomer was looking past him as they looked around the swamp, focused on the bouncing of a slime somewhere behind them both, their hat was staring holes straight into Purpled's soul. Purpled had never thought much of Boomer's hat, having accepted it as just another one of his weird fashion statements, but having it stare at him in such a way felt *unnatural*. Like it was the first thing to truly see him, not just today, but in all his life. He wanted to run from it.

He couldn't.

"Is someone out there?" Boomer called out, suddenly on his guard as he jumped back to his feet. "Who's invisible? I told you to stop with that shit, Hannah. You know it doesn't work on me."

"What?" Purpled couldn't help but ask, taken aback. What did Boomer mean, didn't work on them? Were they talking to their *hat?* "Yeah, I'm here. It's Purpled. What the hell is going on?"

Boomer paused, still looking up at their hat, which was, in turn, still staring holes into Purpled's very soul. "No, I don't–yeah, of course I trust you." He paused. Tentatively tried to match his gaze to where his hat was looking, to Purpled, but his line of sight was off. They were staring over Purpled's shoulder, one hand still buried in Dogchamp's fur. "Purpled," the way they said it made it feel foreign, like an unfamiliar concept they'd never known before, "Uh, speak, I guess. I can't see you but, uh, my hat can. He'll translate. He says he can help."

Boomer's hat is talking to them. Boomer's hat is *translating* for him. Okay, sure, why the fuck not? "What's going on? Tubbo walked through me earlier and nothing can see me or aggro on me, and now you're-I mean, and now *Boomer's* acting all strange. What happened to me?"

He tried not to sound as desperate as he felt. As scared as he felt. Would Boomer's hat judge him? *Could* it judge him? He didn't want to find out.

"Hat says . . . you're cursed," Boomer parroted, uncertain. "Something went wrong? You weren't-this wasn't supposed to happen, but some spell, or magic or something . . . it's hard to tell. It went wrong. It's . . . erased you, kind of. You're kind of in a limbo. Not really here, but not really gone. Like a ghost, in a way."

Cursed. Of course he was. He knew exactly when it happened, too, exactly who did it. Boomer's hat said it wasn't supposed to happen. That the spell had gone wrong. Had it even been a spell? Had Hannah's anger just manifested into something much bigger than her, much bigger than either of them, weaving into whatever had made him like this? Into a monster? Hannah had told him to disappear, for all she cared. If that that was how he saw their friendship, their reality, then so be it.

She got her wish, in the end. Both of them did.

"Boomer," he started, the cotton returning to his mouth, just like it had during his argument with Hannah. He did his best to push through it, at least as much as he could. "You don't remember me, do you?"

Boomer would never talk to him like this. If his hat had correctly explained the situation, he'd be all over the damn place. Poking fun at Purpled, telling jokes, doing everything to make him feel better about it while simultaneously dragging him through the mud over it. If Boomer remembered him, they'd be reaching out to Hannah, so the three of them could figure it all out together, like they always had.

Something flickered in Boomer's eyes. Despite not being able to see him, they averted their gaze, looking down to Dogchamp shamefully. "I- no. I'm sorry, um, Purple. I don't. I'm sorry."

Purple. He doesn't even remember my name.

Purpled just nodded. He didn't know if he could do anything else. Say anything else. He was numb, completely and fully numb, barely able to even process their words. He doesn't know how long he stood there. He doesn't know when he found the energy to move his feet, to call Dogchamp back to his side, to begin the track back to the Greater SMP lands and back to his home. Reality felt like it was blurring around him, collapsing around him, unable to stabilize itself now that he'd learned the truth of it. He wished it would collapse. Maybe then he'd be spared from this fate, from this curse. Maybe then he'd be able to rest.

The next thing he knew, he was back in his UFO. Face buried in Dogchamp's fur, curled up next to the window in front of the cockpit. It was dark outside, now. The stars were out, blinking against the vast darkness of the space he so desperately longed to return to. He felt nothing, looking up at it now.

He'd gotten what he wanted, hadn't he? What he told Hannah he desired. No one remembered him. No one could even see him. The second his ship was fixed, he could fly home, just like he'd always dreamed of, and he'd be leaving nothing behind. No one to miss him, no one to mourn his passage. That was always his intention, wasn't it? So why did he feel so empty?

He tried to keep track of time. He didn't leave his ship anymore; didn't see why he should gather the energy to. What was the point, if no one below could see him, much less remember his existence? Dogchamp was resourceful. He could take care of himself, even without Purpled's assistance. Dogchamp didn't need him in the end, either. He etched tally marks into the hull of his ship. Counted sunsets and mapped moon cycles as often as he could. Time seemed to slip from him, though, no matter how hard he tried. Days bled into each other. The moon would be full one day and new the next. Constellations stopped lining up with their seasons. It was like reality itself was against his very being, refusing to align to a glitch in its matrix. After XD knows how long, Purpled stopped trying.

After XD knows how long, his UFO became overgrown with flora. Vines dangled from the vents. Roses sprouted from the control panel. Crawling ivy infected every wall and crevice it could settle into. He could barely walk without tripping over a stray vine or branch. He'd tried to clip them, once, to drive them back and regain some sense of normalcy (whatever that even *meant* anymore). When he woke up the next day, however, they'd grown back tenfold, almost emboldened by his attempts at a trim job. He let them be after that. The fact that they were even growing within should've been enough of a tip-off that they were in no way natural in their growth; his UFO was nearly 100 feet off the ground. Hannah had cursed him, and now her essence haunted his very being in the most literal sense. He wondered if she knew. If she was malicious in her torment, or if her magic had simply grown a mind of its own. If she was even *really* in control anymore, or if it was all just some horrible, fucked-up coincidence.

He didn't leave his UFO anymore. He didn't think he even could, considering the overflowing flora infecting every crevice. Every day, he sat by his windows, face buried in Dogchamp's fur as he became nothing but a ghost to the people below. A forgotten blemish in the fabric of reality.

And so Purpled sat, and watched as a world that was not his, and never would be, passed him by.

A History Revision Journal: Improper Legend, Self Reflections, and Farewells

HOW DO I *tell the Universe this is not what I wanted? That this is not the story I wanted to tell? That I never asked for a legacy more than living? I expected homes to turn to graves, not mouths turned to tall tales. I expected the empty expanse of space, and not to be given new beginnings.*

We find ourselves a hero, a revolutionary leader, 6 foot 6, carefully caged appearance, the beginnings of stardust glittering in the blank Universe. His jacket falls to his feet, hand-sewn by his right-hand man, cradled by the nation who adores him. He turns with a composed smile that is convincing enough to rally a home to greatness. They say his words are like a knife, a polished silver in the raucousness of the world. They say he can merely say the word, and a world will be created, with oceans and continents and a great blue sky, with people created just to bow to the carved-out man with a flag in hand.

But my home was never great, never grand, never anything more than me. Just me and a dream to live safely and freely. I never asked to lead. I am nothing of a God, of a Creator of worlds either, I'm just a man. Though I suppose I am a meticulously constructed statue. How could I not be, when I never wanted to be a leader?

His name is Wilbur Soot. Wilbur, to mean resolute, brilliant, for he is a leader carrying his people to greatness, like Sisyphus, with the world the rock carried by the words born from his mouth. And Soot, to be the ashes in which forests grow, to be the vast histories in moondust. He is a leader that creates with a speech and wave of hand, and births a nation settled between gilded walls between trees, lakes, and a van that has ended its journey, tires sunk into the plush dirt below.

The only thing I'm resolute about is what this took from me. The only thing I'm brilliant about is knowing the ending of this story from the beginning, from the pit in my gut that sat there from the start. And though Soot and ashes can be a place of growth, it also is a signal to the destruction that happened prior. And though Sisyphus carried *the rock up the hill, it was always destined to fall.*

This is a story that starts with strife, muddles through victory, and ends in great sacrifice.

That's one way to put it. But I won't spoil the ending, I'll keep my thoughts to myself, as I always have, as I sit out on Phil's stupid porch nowhere near that fucking crater, or the legacy that's being painted for me. You know, I look the same as the Wilbur in this story, I think, but now I have a streak in my hair as pale as the snow outside Phil's house. Though, unlike the snow, it has no life hidden underneath even though I'm supposed to be more alive than I ever have been.

We'll start with where we began, just a man and his brother, his right hand, the fuel for the star. A shovel in the ground, a brick underneath a tire driving nowhere, and glorious walls seeking placement for the people inside of them. It is said upon the flag dug into the dirt, flowers sprouted around the lakes and trees symbolic of the nation of L'Manberg's great birth. And it is said that with his confident mouth singing independence from the tyrannical Dream of the SMP, an army rallied before he could even give the first order. Like the creation of the universe, an explosion brewed as creation dawned underneath, a greatness in the making. The war began as houses were constructed.

The story starts and ends correctly. It was just me and him at the start. It was just me and my van too, but I never sought greatness. I sought safety. I sought to keep us all together. I sought to keep my brother alive. I created nothing. The life there was from the people that were stupid enough to stick by me. The flowers were lush because they were sung to, the army was just four people desperate to keep their home. They were never there for me, at least I don't believe so. Why would they have been?

The war was glorious, but not without the tribulations that the great leader would easily push by. A great weapon was offered to Wilbur, a final one, The Final Control Room. Believing in his companion, one of the original citizens, he allowed them to go there to win the war. Because securing his nation was more important than all else. However, the weapon was a betrayal, an axe through the first tree of the nation, right through one of each of their hearts. It was a meteor from the great expanse of nowhere, unpredictable and sharp. The great betrayer said, "it was never meant to be". Regardless, Wilbur moved forward easily because he knew small victories don't win the war, and a few losses and sacrifice don't mean sudden defeat.

The war was terrible. It was five and then four unarmed, unarmored, overenthusiastic people not prepared for a reality where we lost. It was one man leading people without ever wanting to lead, and never asking if they wanted to be led. It was one man leading, the only hesitation visible in the cracks in his voice. And it was never meant to be, because I never wanted to do this, to fight. I wanted to live. I wanted all of them to live. And I think moving on is understating it... but I won't get too bitter now the story's not even near over yet. I have to remember my patience.

Emboldened by this betrayal, Wilbur ordered a duel with the leader of the SMP. With his arm, from shoulder socket to fingertip, he ordered his right hand to fight for the righteous independence they deserved. No more tricks. No more rooms with buttons and blackstone secrets. No more hiding and cowering in embassies, vans, or underground tunnels. Just a duel. And they were victorious, the right hand fighting valiantly and true like the glint of sun off the index finger that directed the order. A second heart was lost for the greater cause. "My L'Manberg" they roared, in vibrant peace.

Sometimes legends can be true, but sometimes legends can lie through their jaws about just how hard it was. Do you think I wanted him to fight Dream? Do you think it didn't kill me to see that what his "heart wanted to do" was to lay down his second life for L'Manberg? Do you think I asked him to sacrifice that and more, when he traded his freedom and discs for our independence? Do you think I need the reminder of how much I failed him?

It was a surefire thing, to move forward from one victory to the next, to expand the galaxy in the confident shine in Wilbur's eye. The revolutionary hero turned president, like all the tales told before him, with his right hand by his side vice president.

It's funny how the tale never mentions his name. As if he doesn't matter to me. Is it possible that he feels this way? Because I do care, *I always have, I built L'Manberg for him. It was named because of him. The flowers in it grew because of him. But did I make him feel like he was nothing more than that, a right hand? Like he wasn't even a whole person, a brother that I wanted to keep safe and share in this dream together? I don't know anymore...*

But every hero needs a villain. Every hero faces tribulations after success. The election was rigged from the start, all for a man who knew nothing of nations, nothing of revolutions, and nothing of greatness. He wore a suit at the debate, like he knew he'd be president that day, and his smile curled like the horns around his ears, surefire as his power to take L'Manberg from Wilbur Soot. Where Wilbur was a statue stood resolute, President Schlatt was one captured in his vibrancy, every thought evident across his face. Wilbur never realized another meteor could strike down in his life and change the course of it forever. It perhaps was the only moment in time that shook his whole world.

Did I want power that day? Or did Schlatt just betray me and my mission of safety? That day was hazy. I can still barely think about it. But one thing's for sure, this did shake my whole world. It just wasn't the only thing. I think my world was always a bit shaken in the SMP. I think I always knew I was a failure.

If President Schlatt's tyranny were not enough, he raised his right hand to the horizon and banished Wilbur and his own right hand, and any loyalists to L'Manberg to go along with them, the sun etched like fire behind them, hot with shame and anguish. Wilbur's word was his most powerful asset, which is why upon having this taken from him he stumbled and lost a second life on his way to safety. He wasn't scared though. One life left was nothing when he's the type of person to already have a plan, etched into ravine stone walls on the first night. And like travelers following the North Star, the L'Manbergians followed behind him ready for this battle to take it all back.

I died because I was scared. Terrified even, just trying to exit that place I no longer recognized. But is the legend right? Was I in fact just angered that I lost the presidency? Was it really all about the election? Did I center myself yet again, not even regarding if Tommy got out safely or not? It can't be true. And no one followed me to that ravine.

I had no plan. I had no hope. I lost. L'Manberg was no longer a safe haven. It was no longer a home. I couldn't take it back. How could I?

Wilbur spent the next parts of his days planning, in a now official secret base. Pogtopia, it was named. To represent the expansive utopia planned for L'Manberg, and the genuine joy that the L'Manbergians had for potential victory. Plans were simple and food was plentiful with a new ally that became his left hand, Technoblade. There were consistent reports from the now dubbed Manberg from a spy that served as his eyes. His right hand fed him consistent support and hope for victory. Pogtopia was wonderfully productive, a moonbase about to embark back to the main planet for war.

Pogtopia was walls. Walls closing in. They were my thoughts, scratched into the walls and burnt into my mind every day. It was insomnia, anger, anguish. It was the same fucking potato stew every day. It was letting Tommy down. It was letting Techno down. It was endangering Tubbo. It was fear, for me, about me, and within myself. It was cold. It was the lack of a smile of things that made me whole once before. It was the lack of warmth in the shoulder squeezes from a brother. It was concern layered underneath the potato farm soil as he watched me as sleepless as he. I wouldn't call it productive. I'd call it destruction. And I wouldn't call it a moonbase, I'd call it a rocket floating aimlessly through space without any fuel nor any rescue team on my trail.

The plan was a resolute and strategic war plan, just as before, that secured Independence. However, things changed. One morning Wilbur glanced upon his horizon, his world, cold hands guiding his right hand to what they were going to take back. And in the distance the sun's brightness was snuffed out by a flame. The flag, crackling and sparkling over his retinas. L'Manberg was gone just then, flag no more than a memory, and protective walls dismantled.

I remember it being gone. I remember my hands being cold. I remember my eyes glazing over. I remember my symphony being gone. I remember sinking further into hopelessness. I remember his shaking shoulders as I talked to him. I remember how he looked at me differently as I shouted. I remember how I saw the flag burn with the

Final Control Room, an arrow through his forehead etched clear in my mind. I felt sick.

He couldn't win the war as before. Because he could defeat President Schlatt easily, but his win wouldn't be assured. It's clear for L'Manberg's legacy to be great, he'd have to reinstill hope in them. Because that fire and demolition proved the citizens' belief in its future was gone. So, Wilbur reformed himself into a bitter statue, he turned to his right hand, and he constructed the plan to become a villain. He constructed the necessary quantum of destructive force that would allow him to be so abhorrent, that his own people would centralize against him. His sacrifice would destroy the evil President Schlatt laid over the lands, and regrow the collective hope L'Manbergians had for each other. He told this all to his right hand who with a smile shared the plan with those resting in Pogtopia. These final days would feel like a goodbye tour, but more so it would feel like destiny scribbled into history books titled Bravery or A Wish on a Fallen Star for Hope.

I couldn't win the war as before. Because I had no hope left in what I had created, nor my leadership, all blanketed by my failure to keep Tommy safe. It was a clear thought in my mind then that L'Manberg was never great, and I had no intention of giving them the win. No one believed in me, I used to tell myself. I reformed myself into a bitter statue. I turned to my right hand, and told him we were to be the bad guys. I constructed the necessary quantum of destructive force that would push everyone away, because I was abhorrent. I wanted to die, and for this great failure to die with me. Tommy never told anyone the plan, I didn't even tell him the plan. I said goodbye to no one. I isolated myself and took rushed and rushed steps to my own end. History books should title this chapter Foolishness or A Fallen Star Creates Craters in its Fall.

The plan went perfectly. Wilbur had the Admin help people have doubt for the Pogtopians, that one of them was a traitor. Wilbur prepared explosives underneath L'Manberg and a room to detonate it, covered in his persona's thoughts. He failed to save his spy in the festival to show that his empathy had left his moral code. He yelled at his right hand where others could see, to show that he even gave up on the weapon he trusted most.

Fuck you. I am so sick of this. His name is Tommy, Tommy Innit, Tommy Danger Careful Kraken Innit. He's my brother. And the spy is his best friend, my friend, Tubbo. And I cared for them both immensely. I can tolerate this legend being inaccurate about me and my own ragged heart, but they can't paint them as nothing more than my weapons. They're the people this was all for. I failed them. I failed them in creating that button, in that pit, in that doubt, and in that "you'll never be president Tommy". If you want to paint me as the villain I was, get it right, but don't erase them for my mistakes. Please.

And so, on the night of the full moon they descended into battle with Technoblade's gear, Wilbur's resound tactics, and his right hand's passion. They fought Manberg, they defeated President Schlatt, and the people rejoiced uncertain how to move forward. Wilbur made his right hand president, who made the spy president. Wilbur entered his detonation chamber and awaited his noble sacrifice. There is one thing he did not tell his people, and that was the Reaper that would be killing him was his own father.

It fatigues me that the legend can both pit me as a liar and noble at the same time. At least one of those things was true. I don't want to speak more on this, thinking about that day is still too hard.

And like the event horizon, his father approached him from behind, proud of him for doing what he had to do for the nation of L'Manberg's legacy. And the diamond sword reflected his sorrow. Another star born from his pupils. In the end, a star shines brightest right before it dies, before the supernova, before the release of his legacy. With a salute, he bowed his head to his father, he placed a calloused palm against his heart, and told him this chapter was over, and the cheers behind him the dawn. He will be remembered for his overwhelming dedication to the nation made in his image.

And like the event horizon, Phil nearly cried at what state I had gone in, in which all light left my eyes. And the diamond sword reflected my fatigue. A black hole born from my irses. In the end, a black hole will eventually implode in on itself, before it can continue taking his own legacy and everyone with it. With a salute, I told my father, "it *was never meant to be", and I placed my aching hands against the blade, and I told him this story was over, the chaos behind me proof of that. I will be remembered as the man who blew up a home, to a nation that I lost hope in because of my own short-sightedness.*

And he stayed still, like a statue, and awaited the warm arms to lay him to rest, his country the memorial.

It's funny, to think legends would say I had a memorial at all. It's funny, that they'd think I had any intention of bearing the weight of continuing the legacy, as if I had any thought to legacy at all. It's funny that they don't tell the story of my overwhelming insecurity, my destruction, my hatred. It's funny, they don't even mention how people mourned, or laughed, or cried, as if I never existed at all. They don't even mention what happens after the 13 years waiting for the train to stop.

I just wanted things to stop.

And that's where his story ended, a smile on his face, and this nation carried on in his name.

Wait no! This is not...this is wrong.

L'Manberg lived on, with strength and hope for the future.

L'Manberg is dead! It's gone. It's nothing more than an overgrown crater in the ground.

And if you ask those who still live there, around the bend of the hill along its oldest path, and those who have moved on to different things, they'd be able to tell you the story outlined today. They'd be able to tell you that he was great.

I was not.

And that he was triumphant.

I was not.

And that he was a hero, amongst those he left behind, amongst the pearlescent sunrise over an oakwood bench, to the embassy and to the future. He was their leader, shining and glorious, a marbled smile of pride and hope.

I am nothing of the sort. I am a failure. I am gone, with my legacy a crater, with then myself, my ghost, a blue stain on the sky above, without a grave save for the destruction below and apologies stuck to the Chekhov's gun of my mouth now that I've returned to the Earth and the people within it.

He is and was loved.

I hope to be forgiven.

...

Is that it? The end of the tale? I don't know what to say. I don't even know if being angry is worth it.

...

I guess it's my turn to speak. To breathe for a moment. Ironic, that a legend doesn't include me coming back to life, that it wouldn't babble about how it was some miracle or unexpected feat reflective of my innumerable strength. Though I suppose it's good that it doesn't mention it. Though I adore seeing the Universe again, the warmth of the sun against my cheeks, I don't feel good about being back, if that makes sense. Revival doesn't feel like a miracle. I feel nearly as empty as I did back then.

I still feel dead, after all this time, my hands are as pale and blue as they were before. People see me as dead, as this figure, as this leader, as this planner, as a man who's weapons are words, as a ticking bomb planted underneath a victory. The story doesn't continue to tell what I endured for 13 years, and it doesn't praise my coming back, and it certainly doesn't see the desperation I have to right my wrongs before I leave again. It doesn't see that I don't feel home here, not after all that I endured. So yeah, maybe it's quite alright it doesn't talk about the supposed miracle of my revival.

Legends are no more than things we convince ourselves of. I am not the hero of any story, nor great victor, nor seeker of power or *greatness. I'm just here, with mistakes muddled into the few wins to my name.*

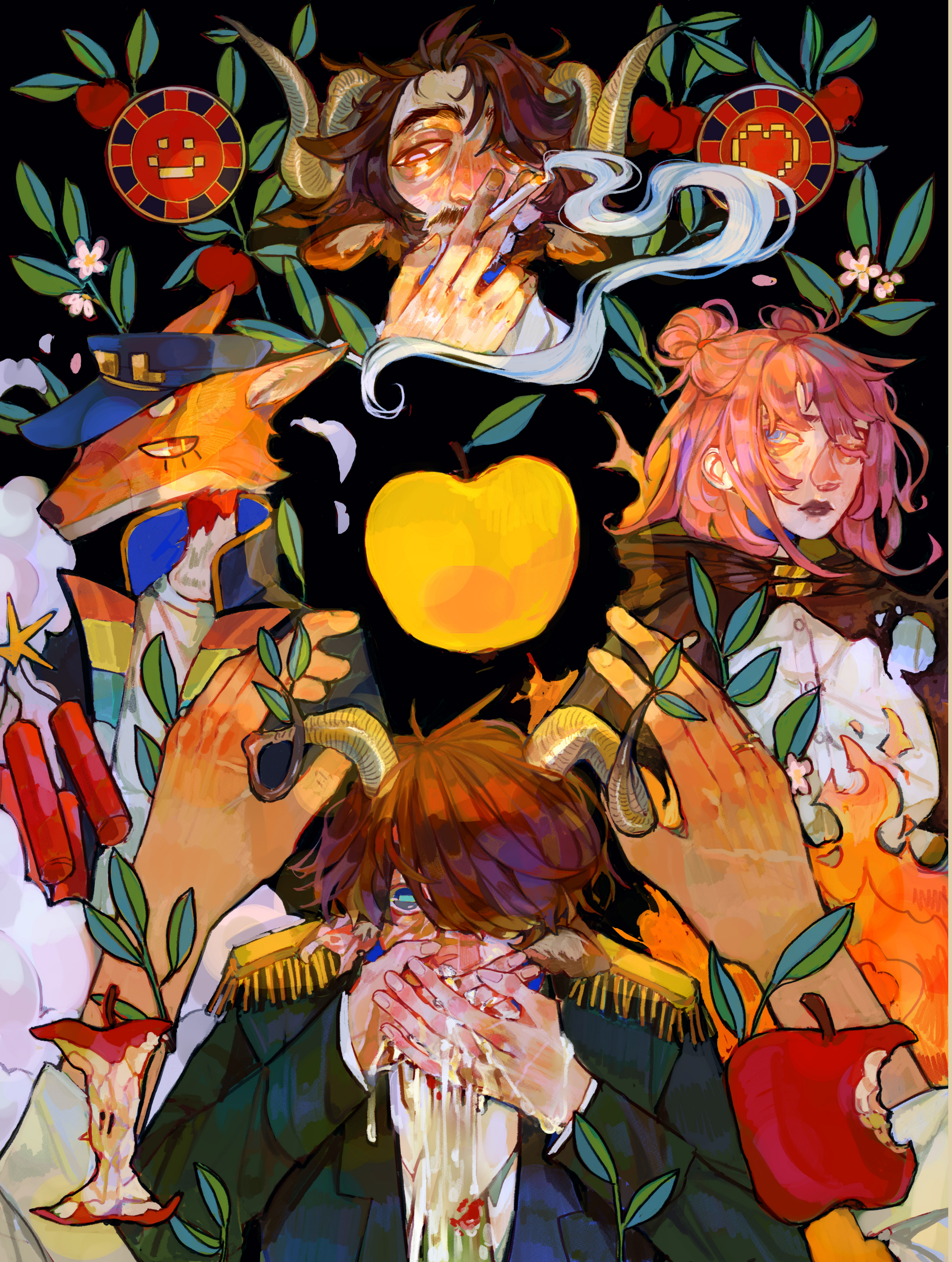
Though, sometimes I see the way Tommy looks at me. I wish I could look at myself like that in the mirror. I feel like laughing, almost. Throughout this whole time I could not recognize myself in this tale. I barely can recognize myself all on my own. But even through it all, and even through my doubts, Tommy still recognizes me. He still sticks by my side. Not as my right hand, never that, but as Tommy Innit.

He doesn't say the words, but maybe that says enough. Maybe I shouldn't be sitting here, procrastinating my farewell to the server by reading this bullshit legend and asking myself if it's true or not. Because I don't think I will ever know the answer. I don't think I know myself well enough, I don't think I trust myself enough, I don't think I'm strong enough to see myself the way Tommy sees me.

Maybe the legend should talk about him instead.

Maybe the legend should say I needed space, to heal, to leave, and Tommy would sit on this same porch, sneakers drenched and cold in the snow, cursing at the clouds in the sky. And maybe he'd stare North to where my original home is, as if I were the directional star, as if to say he's waiting for us to meet again when I have the heart to forgive myself for him.

It is important to emphasize that he is and was loved.



The Tale of Schlatt

ON A LONG walk home with his father, a young man came upon an apple tree, standing alone in the snow. He was hungry, and curious how fruit could grow there, so he reached for an apple.

“Stop,” the father said, pulling his son away from the tree. He glared at the apples, red dusted with white snow. “You don’t want to eat those.”

“Why not? I am hungry,” the young man whined.

His father hurried them past, refusing to look back at the tree. “When you see apples where there shouldn’t be any, my son, those apples belong to Schlatt. They are dangerous, and you should not go near them, lest he appear.”

“Who is Schlatt?” The young man’s curiosity outweighed his sullenness, and he looked up at his father as they walked.

The father looked at his son, and decided he was old enough. He reached into his bag, pulling out a thick, time-worn tome, and turned to a page near the end of the book.

“The Tale of Schlatt is a warning, both to those who would meet him, and those who would follow in his path,” the father began to read.

No one would have called Schlatt a good man, but there were points where many called him friend. He was funny, and he was a schemer, and he was the kind of liar that framed himself as brutally honest.

Schlatt was a charming narcissist, who cared only about himself, but knew that others were useful in getting things for himself. He was the kind of man who would eat the whole apple, from stem to seeds, just so that no one could get even a single bite from a left-behind core.

Some people got respect by being kind, by being loved. Some got it by being useful. Some got it by being lucky.

Some got it through fear, or impressiveness. Sheer balls.

Schlatt was one of the last of these. His plans were not particularly clever, usually borne of impulse and greed, and yet his audacity brought him success more often than it should have.

He found himself in a new land, just on the brink of beginnings - but the overseer didn't know Schlatt, and didn't trust people he didn't know, so he banished him from the land for the time being.

As he was forced out, Schlatt took himself a souvenir - a lopsided, underripe apple from a tree near the portal. He paused in the doorway to eat it, but as he went to bite down, the portal took him through.

In the space between worlds, Schlatt looked at the apple. It was different now, not to the eye, but to the mind. Like being taken from the world where it belonged had corrupted it, frozen it in the moment of the portal's passage.

Even in such a short time in this land, Schlatt had made an impression on people. They listened to him. And people noticed that people listened.

The time was not long before he was invited back, as a guest. There was an election to be held that day, and candidate-President Wilbur Soot would be most grateful if the respected Schlatt would speak in support of his campaign. A final-hour endorsement to seal the deal.

Schlatt stood on the stage. He looked out at the crowd, gathered, hanging on his word.

Schlatt grinned. He could have some fun here, couldn't he?

He had a mouthful of poison and some time to waste.

"I, Jebediah Schlatt, am running for president."

The look on the faces below - betrayal from Wilbur, and a confused hope from the crowd - fueled him onwards. He pounded the podium with a heavy fist.

"Someone needs to shake things up around here! Make this place a truly great nation!"

The murmurs rumbled through the crowd, and Schlatt stepped back, the seeds planted.

If Schlatt were an honest man - which he wasn't - he knew he couldn't win. His name was known, but not known enough; not next to a war hero like Wilbur and his annoyingly beloved sidekick.

But Schlatt wasn't the only opponent in the race.

Quackity knew he couldn't win. His running mate had slept through the election, and he was alone. Wilbur had made an insulting offer of vice presidency to him, meant to keep him in line and steal his pride.

Quackity was angry.

And while neither he nor Schlatt (nor poor young Fundy) had enough votes to overcome the incumbent President on their own, the math was just so that he and Schlatt together could snatch victory from Wilbur's hands.

He approached Schlatt with one goal in mind: keep Wilbur from winning, whatever the cost.

Schlatt grinned, shook his hand, and shoved Wilbur away from the microphone. He could take it from here.

During his speech accepting the victory, Schlatt continued eating the apple he had been munching on during the vote tally, the one brought out of this world and back into it. He gestured with it, exposed core to the audience as he spoke of his plans for the great nation. Seeds and spittle alike flew from his mouth as he called for the exile of his opponents - there would be no challenge to his victory.

One seed sank into the soil behind the podium, unseen.

As Manburg grew, so did that seed. Faster than any seed should grow.

It turned into a sprout, and a seedling, and a sapling. Its bark grew thick like the walls ringing the country, and almost overnight it was tall enough to splay its leaves and cast the stage in shadow.

And far before its time, the tree bore fruit.

More apples. Schlatt, taking it as a sign of his rightful place, would eat nothing besides the apples from this tree. He allowed no one else to taste of its fruit.

A diet of apples, alcohol, and athletic shakes should have been far too little to sustain a mortal man. Yet Schlatt survived. Whatever twisted magic had infected that first apple corrupted the rest, and there was power in the poison.

The roots dug into the soil, seeking water, and slipped into the river running through the Manburg valley.

Where it took water, the roots left poison behind, seeping through the river. Fish died, or left and never returned. Plants wilted along the banks.

Still thirsting, the roots cracked the rocks lining the aqueducts, and broke through. They drank from there as well, spreading further their taint.

Crops refused to grow. Livestock grew sick and perished.

Without trade from the outside, and pestilence-caused famine on the inside, the people began to starve.

Schlatt raised taxes, and threatened to kill anyone who approached his apple tree with his own two hands.

The people turned to killing the spiders that roamed in unlit corners, clawing out their eyes and swallowing them whole, praying the pains in their stomach from poison would be weaker than those of hunger.

It was horrible. But it was all they had.

Besides Schlatt and his forbidden apples, of course.

The people were unhappy. Schlatt didn't really care, but unhappy citizens made for rebellions, and Schlatt didn't like the sound of that.

So he did what all great and evil leaders do when people need to forget about being unhappy. He held a festival.

The Manberg Festival was touted as a celebration of democracy, a rallying of the citizens to see all the greatness that their nation had produced. A big party to have fun and announce future plans for Manberg, and all were invited - besides the exiled Tommy and Wilbur, of course. This festival was meant to show off how much better they were without them!

But there was a secret, second purpose to the festival. When Tubbo, the right-hand man of the Cabinet, came forward to begin the real festivities, Schlatt stopped him.

And threw him in an open-faced cage; a box with just enough visibility to stare into wide, fearful eyes with a sneer.

Tubbo was a Traitor, still siding with his old friends that had been tossed out of the country. Schlatt had been suspicious, but Tubbo's frequent absence from the festival he himself had planned had sealed the deal.

If there was one thing Schlatt hated more than anything in the whole world, even more than crying and the distant land of California, it was a traitor. Specifically someone betraying him, of course - Schlatt couldn't care less who was loyal to whom, as long as people obeyed him.

A man who has loyalty to nothing but himself sees those who betray him as the lowest of sinners.

So Schlatt locked Tubbo in place on the podium, in front of the gathered citizens, laid bare the crime of betrayal, and called the legendary warrior Technoblade to his side. His eyes flickered to the rooftops, and he saw Wilbur holding Tommy by the wrist, and Schlatt grinned in terrible victory.

He knew Technoblade was part of the gathering rebellion as well, but Schlatt was cunning. Technoblade was not the victor of a thousand wars by taking risks he needn't take, and the sea of Manburgian faces was too much of a risk to resist.

Schlatt ordered Technoblade to take one of Tubbo's eyes. To show the blindness of those who would turn on him, and leave Tubbo with a reminder of which he would never be free

And Technoblade, too smart not to fear the retribution of the crowd below should he disobey, whispered an apology, and raised his weapon.

And fired.

The blast of fire seared Schlatt's side as it threw him from the platform, and his lungs would never be the same, but still his laugh echoed in the chaos.

That day is known in history as the Red Festival.

A poisonous seed of discord, of pain and distrust, was planted in the rebellion that day. That Technoblade would do such a cruel thing, that Wilbur would hold Tommy back until it was too late, that no one came to Technoblade's aid yet they blamed him for what he had to do.

Schlatt had struck a blow not to kill, but to wound. To bleed the rebellion dry, to turn his opponents' strengths against themselves.

All with a few words.

From his place at Schlatt's right hand, Quackity watched with horror. This is not how he had planned things. He thought he could control Schlatt.

Schlatt treated him with less respect than even Wilbur would have, and was driving the country to ruin for his own gain. And Quackity had no power over him.

Now Quackity was faced with what "victory whatever the cost" truly meant.

He tried to trick Schlatt, to outwit him with a fake building approval with buried language that would legally seize his power. Schlatt laughed, and burned the paper in front of him, already aware of the treachery. He didn't keep Quackity around because he 'trusted' him - he kept him around as arm candy.

Quackity watched the papers burn, a month of work and hope gone, and the remnants of his pride trampled on.

Quackity lunged, wresting the embossed lighter from Schlatt's hand. In the first moment of listening to instinct he'd allowed himself in months, he punched Schlatt in the face, and hurled the lighter at the precious apple tree.

For all Schlatt's oil-slick words, there was nothing but a guttural cry as the brittle, underwatered tree burst into flames. He completely ignored Quackity, throwing himself towards the blaze, seeking something he could do. He tried to smother the fire with his jacket, but that, too, burned, singeing his hands until he was forced to let go.

The tree burned for a day and a night, and when the rains finally came, nothing was left. Not even a stump, or roots, only barren and poisoned land beneath it.

Without the apples, Schlatt was living on protein shakes and alcohol. It wasn't enough to keep up his strength, and the poison began to seep from his fading muscles back into his bloodstream. His lungs felt like they ended higher and higher in his chest. The sheen in his hair turned to oiliness, to falling out at the slightest touch. His suits went from tight, to loose, to tight from badly-sewn-in padding.

Poison and greed both need to be fed constantly, lest they turn on the one who would have them.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away, but with the apples gone and his health worsening, Schlatt turned to threats of violence to keep Ponk from telling him he was anything less than strong. In his head, as long as he didn't let anyone tell him that he wasn't strong, he could keep up the front.

And if he wasn't strong, he was weak. And anyone knowing you were weak was as good as handing them a knife and showing them your throat.

When the residents of Pogtopia stormed Manburg, Schlatt didn't even pretend to worry. He had secured the loyalty of Dream, and his allies, with a great power. The god of the server had “gifted” Schlatt with a book (without the god knowing, of course), and though Schlatt couldn’t figure out why it was important, it was enough to get Dream on his side.

And that was all he needed. Those ragtag fools would regret ever challenging him!

Schlatt didn’t even bother joining the fight - he had a workout to get to, and Dream could handle things.

Except Dream was smarter than Schlatt.

Dream got Schlatt to hand over the book before the battle, on some pretense of safety, and then simply surrendered when the tide began to turn. His loyalty to Schlatt was conditional, and his end had been fulfilled.

Dream’s betrayal cost him nothing, and Schlatt everything.

By the time the rebels made it to Schlatt, drinking away what he could feel were his last moments, there was nothing left of him but the shell.

Schlatt cursed the traitors - Dream and Quackity and Fundy, oh, Fundy. Fundy could have been someone, if he just knew how to be his own man.

He swung his sword, and it slipped from weak fingers, clattering on the floor. He swung the bottle, and it shattered, alcohol burning in the glass cuts.

Schlatt’s heart pounded, and pounded, and pounded, and all the poison from all the apples rushed through his veins. Staring all of them in the eye, he refused to let any of them get the closure of killing them - for once in his life, he would do this himself.

Schlatt died from the poison coursing through his heart, spitting a new kind of poison from his lips. His dying words were a curse upon the land.

“When I die, this country goes down with me.”

And there is power in a dying man’s words, and there is power in a curse that proves itself true.

Schlatt died, but was not killed, and the seeds he planted had done their work. The celebrations had not even begun before triumphant victory turned itself to a bitter, ashen thing.

Technoblade felt betrayed, and moved to pay the favor in kind, by setting his Wither-beasts on the land before anyone had yet recovered from the battle.

And Wilbur, having seen how deeply fixed the poison was in his land and in himself, tore both out at the roots. He gave Philza the sword so that there would be at least one villain slain by a hero that day.

Manburg went down with Schlatt’s death. L’manburg held on, by the skin of its teeth, but its doom was written in the mix of unburnt gunpowder and its founder’s blood.

The funeral was for two purposes: to establish a tradition of respect for the Presidency, and to celebrate their freedom from a tyrant. Not one person at his funeral mourned Schlatt, and most openly mocked him, spitting in his grave.

Quackity split the corpse open in its casket, tearing open the ribcage. In front of all those gathered, he lifted Schlatt’s heart - the man’s killer - into the air. A black and shriveled thing that looked like it had never been alive.

And Quackity ate the heart, the way Schlatt had eaten apples. Right down to the rotten, poisoned core.

But the problem with tyrants is not only the damage they do themselves.

It is the seeds of twisted truths they plant in the hearts of good men. It is the corruption of good intentions, fueled by pain and fear and anger.

And pride.

And a new apple tree began to grow behind Schlatt’s grave, using his rotting corpse as fuel.

In his turn, Tubbo stood at Schlatt’s grave, staring at the tree as if the dead man could give him answers. He had a decision to make, between his country and his best friend, and he did not know what to do.

Schlatt had been a monster, but he had always known what to do -even if it was the wrong thing, he always did something.

The wind whispered, and Tubbo reached up, pulling an apple off the lowest branch. Before he could change his mind, he chomped, right through the stem and the core.

Just like Schlatt used to do.

Every bite felt like ash and tasted like whiskey. Even after the apple was gone, it felt like it was stuck in his throat. Tubbo choked, coughing to himself, but he had no time. Dream would be here soon, no matter how much his throat tightened or his head throbbed or his stomach churned.

When Tubbo stood between Tommy and Dream, his heart twisted, and he chose power over loyalty. He broke the word he'd given that morning to everyone, and ordered Dream to take Tommy out of his country.

Those watching swore that Tubbo had horns that day - just starting to curl their way out of his hair, spiraling, a brown so deep they could be black. They glinted in the sunlight as he watched Tommy, every single step, until he disappeared past the remnants of the obsidian walls.

Tubbo turned. His face was set, dark.

A single step, and the setting cracked.

Stumbling, he rushed to the edge of a crater yet to be fully repaired, doubled over the edge, and vomited. One heave, two-

The apple came back up, splattering the ground in a black-golden ichor. Only a single bite held itself down. Tubbo stared at the ichor, and his reflection in it, with silent revulsion.

Tubbo couldn't stomach the apple, or the unrepentant selfishness it demanded.

But the poison's work was done. From that day on, Tubbo was a little more ruthless. And the hair over his ears seemed to grow in a curl, spiraling, a brown so deep it could be black.

In his turn, Fundy stood at Schlatt's grave, watching the leaves rustle in the wind through the unkempt stones. The ultimatum for L'manburg had been laid before them, and the leaders were frantically gathering supplies for the coming fight.

Schlatt had been a madman, but he'd had a few points about the country. He never pretended to be better than he was, and people listened to him even when they knew he was awful.

Starlight gleamed off one of the apples, and Fundy pulled out the sword he'd taken from the man, cutting the apple down. His stomach was in knots, and he couldn't eat the whole thing, so he peeled the apple with his sword instead. The peel was long and thin and far too red in this dim light, but Fundy ate it in one spiraling bite.

It clung to the inside of his throat, never fully reaching his stomach. Fundy felt empty and full, all at once, and grit his teeth against the pain.

He tossed the peeled apple onto the grave. For the worms to eat.

When the defenders of L'manburg came scrambling for the stores, they found everything gone. The chests had been reduced to ash, and anything of value was missing or destroyed.

From on high, Fundy watched them, holding Schlatt's sword in one hand and a final stick of dynamite in the other. He laughed, and the sound echoed into the old crater from his father's betrayal below.

It was a terrible laugh. A familiar laugh, rasped at the edges, and turning into a hacking cough.

The peel had finally made its way down his throat, the explosion of the supplies dislodging it, but Fundy's voice would never be the same. It would always sound like he'd been smoking.

As the world crumbled under the Doomsday assault, Niki opened her eyes against the blazing air, and saw the edge of the wreckage. It ended just before the half-ruined remains of Schlatt's tomb.

Something in her rankled at the thought that, even dead, Schlatt would escape consequences for the destruction that he had set in motion.

And so, with the same lighter that set fire to the L'mantree, Niki lit up the apple tree growing over Schlatt's empty grave. Burning down the symbols of both the men who wrapped her heart in this choking anger and grief. She stood and watched the leaves dance, the branches dissolve, the apples caramelize. It smelled like the world's worst pie.

No one noticed one more plume of smoke amidst the rain of fire. But even the drenching rains could not save the tree, so wholly consumed that the very roots crumbled to ashes.

As Doomsday came to its bitter end, Schlatt's bitter curse on the land had come true. The twisted power seeped into Schlatt's twisted soul, and he came into his own.

Demons are born when wicked men leave wounds that can never be healed.

And Schlatt was more than happy to become a demon.

The demon spent his time hopping worlds, causing chaos and destruction wherever curiosity brought people into his grasp. He posed as gods, as priests, as businessmen - as whatever was the most convenient lie at the time.

In his wake grew apple trees where none should be, like a malicious Johnny Appleseed, and a deal could be sealed with a single bite.

He found particular joy in picking up the souls of those who once called him a friend, dancing them around in pockets of reality like toys meant to be broken. They would trust him, even when they knew they shouldn't, and if they got wise? If they stopped being fun for him? He could just wipe their memory and do it all over again.

Once again, it was not Schlatt choosing to return to the server. It was someone who thought they could use him.

Quackity thought he knew Schlatt too well to be fooled by him ever again. When he found the ghostly gym that the dead man had made himself, a home base on this plane, he thought he was too smart to be roped into another one of his schemes.

Schlatt saw the glint of desperation in Quackity's eyes - that need to feel like he was outsmarting everyone - and did what he did best.

He planted a seed.

Quackity would always want power - well, Schlatt knew of a great power. The power he had given Dream before his betrayal, so long ago.

The revival book. Power over death itself.

And Quackity took the bait. Like a fish happily munching on the free worm, not even realizing it's been hooked.

As if it was his idea entirely, Quackity offered Schlatt a wager. For old times' sake. Any game in the Las Nevadas casinos - Schlatt could even choose!

If Schlatt won, Quackity would get the book back from Dream and revive him. If Quackity won, Schlatt would spend eternity working for him in Las Nevadas.

Once again, Schlatt grinned, and shook his hand. Line and sinker.

Quackity believed himself no fool. He had absolute power over all aspects of the casino, including the win rates of the games. The house always won, no matter how hard it had to cheat to make that happen.

And yet, a single seed of something foul in his stomach had rooted itself.

Arrogance. Hubris. An unblinking and absolute belief that things would only go his way.

The arrogance in Quackity craved the rush of risk, the smugness of true victory. And so his cheating was intentionally imperfect, his rigging just this side of absolute, so when he won he could pretend it was fair. Tell himself he earned it. That he deserved to win.

But evil, like water, will find the smallest crack. Never leave the door unlocked for a devil. He doesn't care about the illusion of fairness.

A bet with a devil is as good as a deal. Worse - when you lose (when, my son, not if), the devil doesn't owe you even the pretense of payment or balance.

Schlatt didn't really care about being revived. He was busy with other things, and had gotten used to being a malevolent spirit. Flesh and blood were too inconvenient.

He didn't care about winning. He just wanted Quackity to lose.

And lose Quackity did.

In his desperation to avoid the penalties for failing to uphold his end of the bargain - for he knew Schlatt as not a patient man, and deals with the dead to have heavy consequences - Quackity gave himself to fear, and to the darkness that he had until now been skirting the edges of. He did terrible things, that caused others to do terrible things.

Fear and pain and anger spread across the server like the twisting roots of a tree, all stemming from a single seed.

The revival book.

Schlatt sat back, watching the pain and chaos spread across the world below him. People would swear they caught glimpses of him in the background, in the corner of their eyes but never direct. Always grinning, always watching.

Apple in hand.

* * *

The father closed the book, pulled back to the present time. His son thought for a long moment about the long story.

"So the point of the story is to never eat an apple?"

Sighing, the father tousled his son's hair. "No, the point of the story is a warning. Schlatt was an evil man, but it was the arrogance of the people around him that allowed so many terrible things to happen. That is why so much of the story is not about him, but the people who followed. Pride is the seed of sin."

The boy thought about the story his father told as they got home. He thought about it during dinner, and during evening chores.

And as all good stories do, it had planted a seed. The boy was curious.

Could a man really grow so powerful just by being evil and dying? Could an apple tree really be a demon's tool?

It couldn't be true. His father had to be stretching the truth. A man who was dead couldn't plant an apple tree, let alone hurt anyone.

So why did his father want him to stay away from the tree? Did he want the apples all to himself?

The boy wanted to know the truth.

That night, when his father was asleep, the boy snuck out the window. He wrapped his coat against the windless chill, and traipsed back out into the night. Up the path they had taken, up through the path cut through the snow.

He walked until he found the tree. The moonlight filtered through the leaves, casting shadows across the still white ground.

It just looked like an apple tree. The boy had seen apple trees before, although not in snow - but other fruits grew in the snow. Their house was surrounded by bushes of berries, who could say an apple tree couldn't survive out here? There was sunlight, and the snow could melt into water for the roots.

The boy looked at one of the apples, a dim red in the shadow of the tree.

"Are you really made of evil?" His voice was soft, laced with skepticism and curiosity in equal measure.

"Who's asking?"

The boy whirled at the sound of the voice. No footprints broke the blanket of snow on the ground save his own. No shadow cast but his and the tree.

And yet the boy knew he was not alone.

“Wh-who’s there?”

And behind him, where there was no one a heartbeat before, there was a man.

“Guess.”

The boy turned, and saw the man. He was a tall man, with deep brown hair and black eyes peering down above a well-trimmed beard. He wore a suit that looked like it was made expensively and treated cheaply.

And he was smirking. It was not a smile - the man did not look like he could smile, only smirk.

The man walked around the boy, and the snow under his feet was unbroken. He leaned against the tree, and the branches were still.

Hands shaking, the boy stared at the man, and the tree.

“You… you must be Schlatt,” he managed barely above a whisper. “The stories… is it true you’re a demon?”

And the man began to laugh, head tossed back, echoing darkly in the night.

The laughter went on and on, like the man didn’t need to breathe until it stopped as quickly as it began. His head snapped down, and he stared at the boy with dark eyes.

The longer he stared, the more he changed in the boy’s eyes.

The man’s hair grew on the sides, warping itself into spiraling horns, a brown so deep it could be black. He loomed higher and higher, feet no longer pretending to anchor with gravity.

And the man’s eyes glinted, his pupil turning long and narrow and stretching to the sides in the middle of glowing golden irises.

The boy knew he should leave. His feet did not listen to him.

His mouth went dry, but he could not speak. His eyes stung, but he could not blink.

His stomach roiled with the feeling of something taking root.

There was a whisper with no voice in his head, that said no words, but promised answers.

The boy was curious, was he? He wished to know of Schlatt, did he? Of demons?

He wanted to know what his father wasn’t going to tell him, yes?

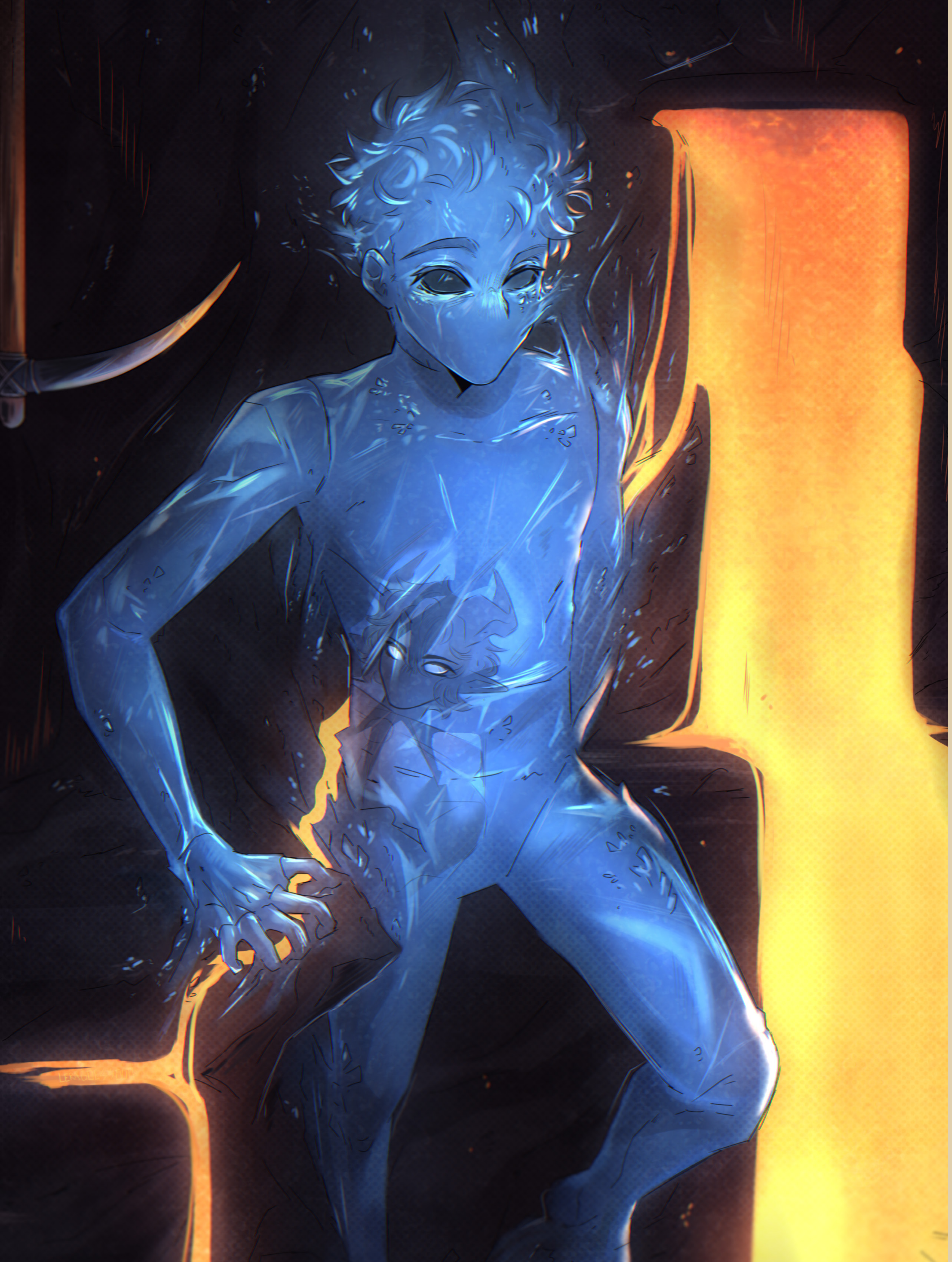
He wanted the whole truth?

The man tilted his head, squinting at the boy. He lifted his hand, and one of the trees shook violently in the windless night. The noise was a rustling, a screaming, a warning.

And one of the fruits fell perfectly into his palm. It glistened in the starlight, reflecting the glow in the man’s eyes and turning from red to gold.

The man shone it on his lapel, floated down to arm’s reach, and offered it to the transfixed boy. He grinned, and it was a terrible and wicked grin.

“Apple?”



The Diamond Statue

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT diamond is a rare block, hard to find and harder yet to mine with success. It shows its glittering face by the borders of magma lakes, at the jagged bottoms of ravines, in the deepslate dungeons where monsters scent for living blood: fickle, valuable, aware of its value. So it may come as no surprise to you that diamond, improperly treated, may acquire strange ideas– but demons are sometimes too confident for their own good, and Badboyhalo more confident than most.

Worse, the demon was lonely. So, having a builder's heart, he put some of his diamond blocks aside while he crafted armor and tools, and set about carving them into the shape of another person. He chipped away sharp edges until the sculpture's form was organic and smooth. He scraped out hands with fingers, a nose and mouth and ears, and planted obsidian in the sculpture's face for eyes.

Then he stood for a long while and admired his creation, complimenting it as though it could hear him– though truthfully he spoke mostly to compliment his own talent.

"Aren't *you* a nice little diamond person," he told it. "Whoever made you must have been a real artist, any individuals who come across you should seek that mysterious demon out and shower him with gifts. I think I'll keep you around for a while, just so I have someone to talk to."

And Badboyhalo did keep the sculpture near, throughout several mining trips to the same cavern and beyond that as he terraformed the cave. For months, he talked to it as though it were a living friend, patting its head when he passed, giving it an iron helmet and calling it *Skeppy* because he thought the name sounded whimsical; and then, having completed his project, he gathered his chests and abandoned the area, closing off passages and taking his torches with him as he left.

The diamond sculpture sat in the dark, awaiting the return of conversation and firelight. He remained there for quite a long time, until he decided that an amazing diamond person who deserved everything in the world clearly had better things to do than wait around for a demon to come to him.

Diamond is fickle, aware of its value. It is also one of the few materials that will hold an enchantment– and a demon, especially a distracted, lonesome demon, is a wellspring of magic. As such, it should come as no surprise that as soon as Skeppy concluded that sitting in the dark was boring, he was able to stand up and walk away.

It took many days for him to find the demon who'd created him, and when he did, he was greatly offended to find that Badboyhalo had begun another project in his absence. A giant mansion was nothing without a Skeppy somewhere in the vicinity, he figured– the demon's creations were dumb and he was dumb and he'd left Skeppy in a cave for *this*, that was *so rude*– but as soon as he saw Badboyhalo's intense focus on his build, his course became clear. Skeppy made building better, Badboyhalo had told him that himself. Therefore, if Badboyhalo had somehow forgotten that, Skeppy would have to remind him.

Skeppy had been created from magic, and it gave him magic of his own. He laid in wait until nightfall, obscuring his glitter by smearing mud over all exposed skin, and tarred the mind of a nearby wolf with his own influence, his mischief and desire for vengeance. He sent the dog to Badboyhalo the next morning, and Badboyhalo lit up like redstone when he caught sight of it, awed at its friendliness and intent on coaxing it closer.

Skeppy narrowed his eyes and let the dog be tamed. He followed after his creator as he spoke cheerfully to his new pet, cooing over its sharp ears and rough-worn paws, and played at destruction whenever he turned his back: pulling tapestries one foot to the side, swapping out materials so dark oak bordered diorite, filling entire rooms with water so that they would bowl Badboyhalo over once he investigated the leakage from under their doors.

By that point, Badboyhalo had been irritated beyond reason. "Okay, *who is doing this?*" He sent the dog to a corner– Skeppy allowed it, letting the impulse to maul Badboyhalo fall by the wayside– and sat down on a crafting table, crossing his arms. "I know it's someone," he said to the air. "You can't fool me, I heard footsteps. I'm capable of putting together clues, you know."

Skeppy made himself invisible; it was easy, since he was so reflective already. He was so good at magic that someone should have given him a prize for it. "Oh yeah?" he called from a safe distance, projecting his voice. "Prove it!"

"Prove it? You just proved it for me!" Badboyhalo declared, jumping to his feet. His tail lashed, eyes narrowed to slits. Skeppy's nonexistent heart thrilled. "You talked, that is literally proving you exist, that is indisputable evidence unless you're a hallucination which is *not* likely– you need to tell me why you're griefing my mansion right now. That is an order."

Skeppy blew a raspberry. Badboyhalo, wily as all demons were and more spiteful than most, said, "Fine. Be that way— but don't think I'm going to let you distract me from my project!"

He turned his back and began to build a strange contraption, laying down a layer of TNT, scaffolding, and gravel above it, fine enough to be considered dust. He worked intently, as he had while terraforming the cave: placing materials quickly and precisely, occasionally stepping back to survey his work, as the hodgepodge of items he'd brought out started to take a recognizable shape.

Or rather, they would usually have taken a recognizable shape. Skeppy could not recognize what Badboyhalo was building at that moment, and it vexed him. Caution, never exactly his strong suit, vanished from his mind entirely.

"What are you even doing?" he asked, drifting closer. Badboyhalo had put a chest in the middle of the gravel and was filling it with strange items: a glowing book, a red apple, a shovel. "Bad. *Bad*, tell me what you're doing."

Badboyhalo sniffed and ignored him. He shooed the dog back and went to the chest again, peering inside like it held the secrets of the universe. Skeppy bounced impatiently on his feet and came up to right behind his left shoulder, trying to see what was somehow more interesting than *him*.

“It’s just a bunch of junk,” he complained, and Badboyhalo shouted, “*Ha!*” and detonated the TNT. Skeppy shrieked in surprise and jumped back.

He’d been covered in gravel, ruining his invisibility *completely*. Skeppy looked up in indignation, planning to at least yell at Badboyhalo for ruining his dramatic reveal, and Badboyhalo‘s contraption opened up and dropped him into an obsidian box like a *tool*.

“And that takes care of that,” Badboyhalo said outside of it, sounding supremely satisfied. “Go bother someone else next time!”

“This means war, Badboyhalo,” Skeppy shouted through the obsidian. “It means *war!*”

It took hours to claw his way out from the obsidian, but claustrophobia was foreign to a being whose very matter had been formed in the pressure of the heated earth; his worst emotion was thwarted indignation, and he felt that every day, often after minor inconveniences.

He did not learn the lesson that Badboyhalo had intended to teach him, which was that capricious, powerful demons were best left alone. Instead, he followed the magic within the tamed wolf and found Badboyhalo growing a jungle around a desert temple, bent over his work with steely determination.

“Not one step closer,” the demon said as soon as he showed up. “I can sense you!”

“Wha– that is *cheating*,” Skeppy protested.

Bad shrilled, “It is not! We’re not playing a game, you’re just being a– a *silly muffin*–”

“Fuck you, say actual words—“

Bad drew himself up bristling. “Language!”

“Denied on the basis of you’re dumb and I do what I want,” Skeppy said, and plopped himself down on one of the crafting tables, shoving tools off so he could fit. They clattered to the ground so loudly that Bad jumped, then narrowed his white eyes into a glare. “Bad. Badboy*halo*. Pay attention to me.”

“I think that would just encourage you,” the demon said. “What I should do is ignore you, or maybe kill you, and that second option is looking really tempting right now.”

“How? I’m invisible again,” Skeppy said. Bad snorted, then pretended he didn’t, in the manner of a cat falling off of a table and licking its chest as though it had intended that result all along. “Come on, you know you want to talk to *someone* about what you’re building. Why are you making a forest in a desert? What’s it *for?*”

“I’m beautifying this desert for someone who insists on keeping it sandy and boring,” Bad said, tail lashing in excitement. “Doesn’t it look better with the sun filtering through the leaves, and all this nice dappled shade? I think it looks better.”

“I like how tall you’re making the trees,” Skeppy said.

Bad beamed in his general direction. “Aw, thank you, whatever your name is.”

“Your worst nightmare,” Skeppy told him. “The bane of your existence. The eternal darkness that plagues your waking days and griefs all your shit—“

“*Language*.”

“Griefs all your stuff,” Skeppy corrected without missing a beat, “and also is cooler than you. I am so much cooler than you, Bad, it’s not even *quantifiable*.”

“If you don’t tell me a name, I’ll make one up to call you,” Badboyhalo threatened. “You can— you can be— I’ll call you *Discount Skeppy*.”

The offense would have taken Skeppy’s breath away, if he had lungs. “*Discount* Skeppy? What, you’d replace Original Skeppy just like that? Whoever that is?”

"Original Skeppy let me talk without interrupting me," Bad said sanctimoniously. "And he was made of diamond, while you're only made of air."

"You know what, I changed my mind, I'm gonna burn all of this down," Skeppy informed him. "*Then* you'll be sorry."

"If you burn it all down, I'll cover you in glowing ink so I can see you anywhere," Badboyhalo said. "I will hound you to the ends of the world. I will burn the earth underneath you, *Discount Skeppy,* until you're thrown into the void! Only then would my vengeance be complete. *You'd* be sorry then."

"I'm not capable of that emotion," Skeppy said. "Give me a better name and something to do or I'll keep bothering you until you're interesting again."

"I'm always interesting," the demon said, miffed. "And you can help me grow these trees if you need a job. I want this jungle to be artfully symmetrical."

Skeppy grumbled, but assisted him in his task, because his goal had been Badboyhalo's attention and this was an easy way to achieve it.

Badboyhalo finished the jungle, and Skeppy followed him to his next campsite, and to the next. He stayed invisible, because Badboyhalo wanted to see his face so badly that it made him look *stupid*, and Badboyhalo made space for him at the campfire each night. He didn't even seem to care that the wolf had wandered off as soon as Skeppy let go of its mind— his focus was on *Skeppy*, where it should have been.

"It's nice having company for this kind of thing," Badboyhalo said to him, lounging against a chest of supplies. The night was black and loud, animals shrieking and scuttling in the forest, monsters clawing their way to the surface, no longer repelled by the light. Skeppy had been taking breaks from admiring how he sparkled in the firelight— he could still see *himself*— to run off and slaughter monsters when they came too close. Badboyhalo, bow in hand, had settled into a comfortable routine

of shouting encouragement and supporting him from a distance.

"Usually I build alone," Badboyhalo continued, musing. "It gets a little boring, honestly, I'm not sure why I still do it. Except that my builds are better than *any* of yours and I have to prove it."

"You had to prove it before you met me? Wow, I really live rent free in your brain."

"In general! Generically, I want to be better than other people, that is a perfectly healthy frame of mind for me to have."

"Admit it, Badboyhalo, you're *obsessed* with me," Skeppy crowed. "I live in your dreams. And your dreams are weird, by the way, you should see a cleric about them or maybe a priest, I never thought *Badboyhalo* was a pervert until I saw his dreams—"

"*Who are you talking to?*" Badboyhalo wailed. "That's not even true, you stupid little *muffin*, that's a mean, horrible lie—"

"Sounds like something a *weirdo* would say," Skeppy said, taking a brief break to vault over a furnace and decapitate a zombie before it tore into his best friend's unprotected back. "Dude, pay attention!"

"No. I have a good reason not to pay attention," Badboyhalo said, and the tone of his voice had shifted, mischief running rich beneath the surface. Skeppy's mind sharpened with glee. "I'm thinking about a new build! A gift for you, Discount Skeppy, after all your hard work."

"Uh-huh," Skeppy said. "And what is this gift?"

"*Well*, I haven't built it yet," Badboyhalo said. "I need some help getting the supplies. Can you help me with that, since I'm building it for you in the first place?"

"This sounds like a trick," Skeppy said, but greed had already ensnared him. "It's really a gift for me?"

"Of course," Badboyhalo said sunnily. "Would I deceive you?"

And so Skeppy was directed to complete a variety of tasks, some difficult and some merely asinine: gathering flowers, hunting creepers, collecting sand in great unworldly buckets and prying gold nuggets free of Netherrack. Badboyhalo followed after him as he did his work, occasionally assisting but more often directing from a distance, and for three days and nights Skeppy continued his efforts.

On the third night, he stomped his invisible foot and demanded to know what was even going on. Badboyhalo broke into giggles, bringing his claws up to his mouth, and said, “Okay, there was no gift, I lied. I tricked you! I finally *got* you, it was a prank all along!”

“What,” Skeppy demanded, and as Badboyhalo explained his scheme grew increasingly heated— but he appreciated pranks even when they happened to him, after a fashion, so at last he said, “Well, I guess if I was gonna get got by *anyone*, it’d be you, Bad.”

“Hm?” Badboyhalo asked. “And why is that? Because I’m so smart?”

Skeppy recognized the manner of a demon fishing for compliments and snipped, “Because *I’m* the best friend you’ve ever had. Who else would let you get away with all the stuff you did for *that long?* I knew something was up. I was humoring you. I do that because I’m a good person, unlike *some* people I could name who are standing very close to me right now.”

“Hey,” Badboyhalo said, offended. “You take that back. And you’re not the *best* friend I’ve ever had,” he added with a sniff. “That would be Skeppy the diamond statue, who never talked back to me and listened to everything I said and was also a very nice shade of turquoise. He was good company.”

Strong emotions were foreign to Skeppy. He was a being of magic and mine-craft, a consciousness newly formed, and diamond found it difficult to change its shape, or its temperature. This was the first time that he had been truly hurt by someone else’s words, and he found that their faint sting echoed into a deeper ache, a cold bruised anger that made him want to bite back to share the pain.

It wasn’t the prank that bothered him, or that Badboyhalo had rejected his declaration of best friendship. It was that Badboyhalo was lying about *this*— about the sculpture that he’d made in that cave so long ago, and poured love into like an overflowing fountain, and abandoned without a second that. That Badboyhalo was so intent on leaving him behind, no matter what Skeppy did to keep his attention, and that he was probably going to leave again as soon as he felt bored.

As soon as Skeppy *bored* him.

The statue stood silent for a long moment.

Badboyhalo asked tentatively, “Discount Skeppy? Are you there?”

“You liar,” Skeppy spat, and Badboyhalo jerked back. There was venom in Skeppy’s voice. “You didn’t like Skeppy. If you’d liked him, you wouldn’t have left him alone in a cave and gone off to do cool things somewhere *else*. You wouldn’t have closed up the mine behind you!”

“Wha– how do you–”

“And you know what, maybe he wanted to talk back to all the dumb things you said! *Maybe* he wanted to get up and fight you sometimes, but you left before he could and he woke up in the *dark* and you didn’t even leave directions because you’re a jerk and an *asshole* and I’m done with you! I am done with you. Go make another Skeppy and compliment *him* for days, I don’t care anymore. I’m gonna sleep in a cave for a hundred years and when I wake up I’ll go do better things in a more interesting place where *you’ll* never find me!”

He summoned his magic— Badboyhalo’s magic, originally, though the demon had never sensed it— and vanished from Badboyhalo’s perception.

“Discount— wait, Skeppy— Skeppy?” Badboyhalo sputtered behind him, increasingly distant. “Hold on, I didn’t mean it, I— where are you?”

Skeppy yelled back, “Don’t talk to me! I never want to see you again!” and broke into a sprint.

His creator’s plaintive shouts faded away. Skeppy slowed, crossing his arms, and let his invisibility drop, exposing his glittering skin to the sun. He made his sulking way to the side of a mountain and dug into the stone, burrowing deep into the earth past dripstone and glowberries, slate and singing amethyst and more *boring* diamond ore without a hint of personality.

He listened for footsteps, but none came. Badboyhalo hadn't followed him.

"Stupid Badboyhalo," he muttered, cutting a nice hole into the deepslate. The temperature so close to the Deep Dark was cool and constant, held separate from the seasons above. It was familiar to him. "Stupid *Discount Skeppy*, who doesn't even exist. Stupid friendship."

He settled into the alcove and bricked himself in, closed his eyes and let his mind drift. A hundred years would be good. One century taking a nap, and when he woke up there would have to be something interesting going on, and maybe he wouldn't care at all about Badboyhalo when he found it.

Time passed as slowly as water dribbling from a stalactite. Skeppy fidgeted, boredom creeping inexorably in, but stayed in place with stubborn determination. He was *not* about to give in. He wouldn't be the first to give in— and *Badboyhalo* wasn't even looking for him—

And there were footsteps in the cave, as soft and shadowy as a cat's. "Hello? Skeppy? I know you're in here, I saw the cobblestone you climbed up here with, you can't fool me!"

Skeppy seethed and stayed quiet, though his nonexistent heart had leaped at the sound of Badboyhalo's voice. It would take more than that to make him show himself.

"Skeppy? I brought you diamond armor," Badboyhalo coaxed. Skeppy dug a little peephole to watch him: his shrinking shoulders and uncertain expression, the curl of concern at his mouth. "It's enchanted. That's a good gift, right? You know you could've just *told* me you're my statue that came to life."

Skeppy drew his invisibility back around himself and said, making his voice come from all directions, "Why? You're the one who *left*."

"How was I supposed to know you were alive, you just sat there!" Badboyhalo argued. "I don't think crafting tables are alive."

"Crafting tables don't have faces," Skeppy shot back. "Or names. Or *eyes*."

"They could have eyes," Badboyhalo said, then frowned. "But, no, that would be weird."

"I don't care," Skeppy said. "Go away, Bad. I don't want to talk to you."

"But you are talking to me," Badboyhalo said, frustrated. "And we're friends, and you just got mad at me for saying you're my best friend instead of the *fake* you, which doesn't even make sense, you muffinhead, so I don't know why you left. Don't you want this nice armor?"

"I'm made of enchanted diamonds, why would I want to put more on my body?"

"Would you just come down here?"

"Not unless you prove you're my friend," Skeppy snapped. "I don't care about gifts or whatever, those don't mean anything. You have to take it back about liking me— okay, you can like *me*, but not the fake me in your head, actual me— and you have to promise you're my best friend. *Mine*. No one else's."

"I can have multiple best friends," Badboyhalo said censoriously. "I mean, eventually. In theory." He crossed his arms. "But fine, I admit it. You're my best friend, Skeppy. I have a lot more fun with you in any circumstance compared to when I do stuff alone."

Skeppy ventured out to the cave floor. "Really?" he challenged. "You really mean it?"

Badboyhalo sighed, but his eyes were bright with relief, a hint of a reluctant smile. "I swear it on how cool my building is," he said, and reached out a hand.

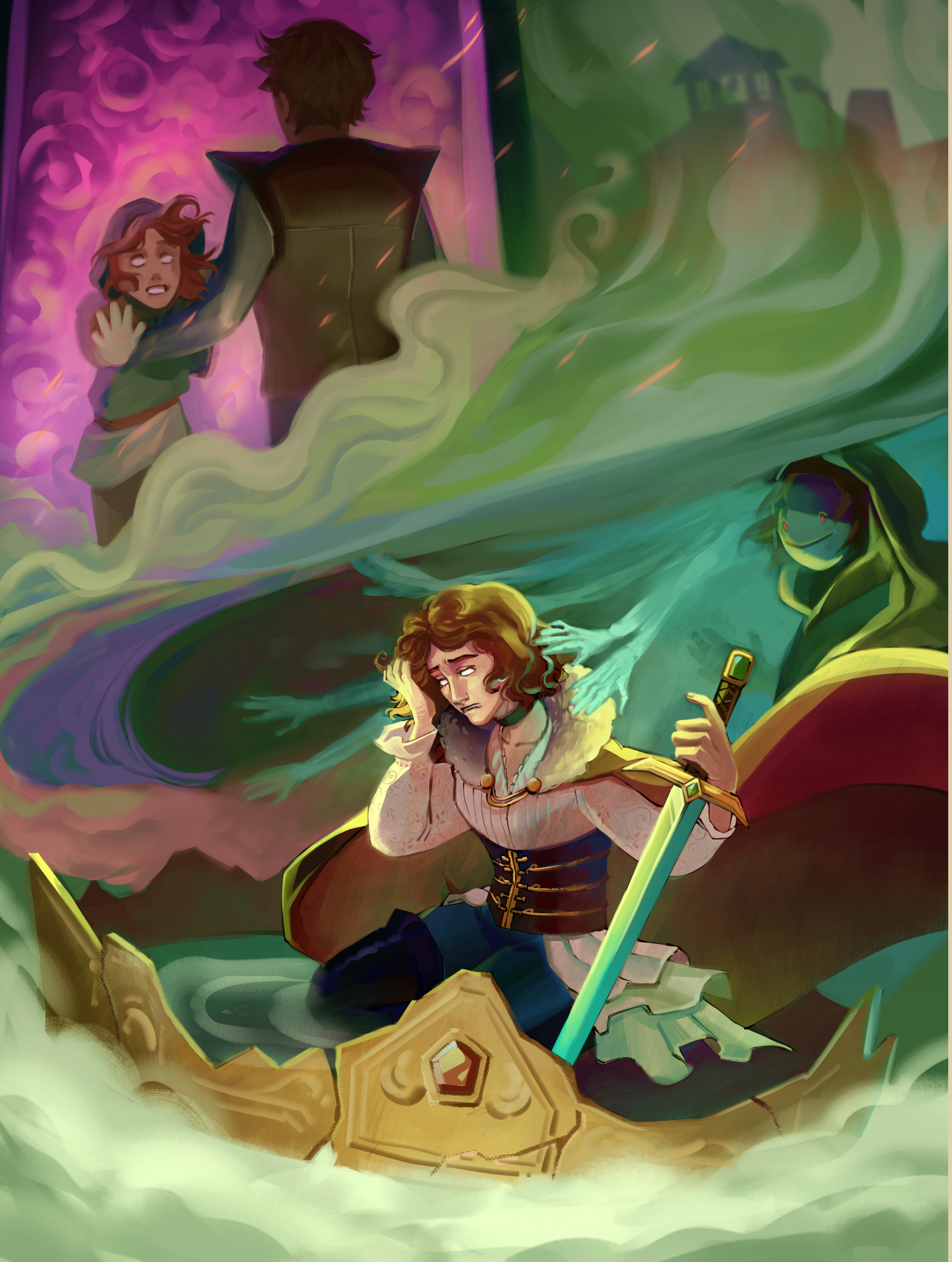
Skeppy glared at him— if this was another trick, he would flip Badboyhalo over his head like a *pancake*, see if he wouldn't— and took it.

Demonic magic reacts in unpredictable ways, especially when the emotions of its source are running high, and diamonds hold enchantments with ease.

As such, it should not come as a surprise that when Skeppy clasped fingers with Badboyhalo, the resultant magical flare blinded every creature in the vicinity.

What exactly Badboyhalo's accidental spell accomplished is lost to history. Some say that it gave Skeppy full sapience for the first time, enabling him to consider interacting with others besides the demon even as it served as a promise of his friendship. Others claim that it granted him great power and immortality, allowing him to stand with Badboyhalo as an equal; and yet others insist that it was merely meant to make Skeppy fully visible at all times to Badboyhalo specifically, with the accidental caveat that he and the demon would be bound for all eternity, holding their lives and hearts in common.

Whatever the case, it is common knowledge that Skeppy was never seen without Badboyhalo for centuries after, and that they seemed content throughout those years to bicker without ever going their separate ways– and certainly, when they were apart, neither could go more than a day without bringing up his counterpart in conversation.



Immortal Betrayer, So They Cry

IT BEGINS WITH a breath of life, as all things do. A life yet to be unravelled, yet to be filled with all things different. It begins with godly hands, moulding an innocent child, unsure of their life to come. And it begins with a gentle, guiding touch of eternal life. A touch to curse and to bless. A touch of something more than human. A blessing of immortality, a marvellous gift, prophets blaspheme. And with all this, it begins.

It begins with Eret, a simple name soon to be synonymous with reverence and respect and fear and revenge and utmost betrayal.

To say the least, it begins with a lot of things.

It begins with a small child running in a gently glowing field, laughing and squealing, a smell of something akin to opium poppies swathing their person. Strong, caring arms scooping them up and a soothing voice rocking them into tender slumber. The laughter of a friend with skin of gold and eyes as green as jade. A feeling of safety and of happiness.

But everyone knows that after happiness comes suffering.

Glowing fields catch fire and laughs build to screams. The child runs, sobbing and alone. The smell of rotting flesh hangs in the air, and ash coats their dry throat. The screams get louder, and the footsteps closer. They choke back a tearing sob and attempt to run faster, only to trip and fall.

No.

They close their eyes, and wait for their inevitable demise. The fire dances closer, and the footsteps stomp louder. The end is nigh.

Yet, the end does not come. Instead, they are greeted with familiar hands hefting them up, paired with a familiar voice whispering urgently.

Come on, Eret. We must leave. We are no longer wanted here.

With sturdy arms, their father lifts them up into safety, into care.

They both leave.

And they both run.

They run until they are weary, until they are safe from monsters that want to drive them out. They run until they reach a special place, where it was believed that men could go to emancipate themselves from their rulers' tyranny. A special place that would bring them far, far away from the land they called home.

Eret and their father stood at the border of this land, waiting peacefully before the chaos that awaited the pair in the unknown sanctuary. It brought them both back to the times when everything was just glowing fields and poppies, and all was good and fine. The two knew that those times were past, and that now, it was time for a new era.

Eret's father turned them around, and looked into their scared, lost eyes.

I know that this is hard, but you must leave Eret.

But why, they cry. They were happy here. They did not want to leave the safety and comfort of the place they called home. They had friends back in those fields, as unorthodox as them, guiding them along their way, to show them the power that they possessed. After all, *vindicta*, the power of the gods, is hard to wield.

And they were going to lose it all.

You must go, their father urged. *They will be here soon.*

Who? Who will be here soon? They asked. *Who, who, who?*

Their father's eyes softened, and he pushed them towards the swirling purple and blue haze.

I'm sorry that I cannot give you the answers you long for. But I promise, one day, you'll understand.

Now go.

Resisting Eret's weak protests, their father pushed them away. He let go of Eret's small, small hands and gestured to them to leave. Naive, innocent Eret dutifully follows their father's instructions despite their questions, because who else could they trust in this world more than their own father? The one who cared for someone like...them.

So, they walk through the shimmering veil that separates their world from ours, ever so unquestioning, unsteady and unsure, with the groundrocking beneath their feet.

* * *

All that Eret remembered now was a glittering field of a land far, far away; a land not of the Nether, nor of the Ender, nor of the Overworld. A land that only belonged in myth and legend, that only Eret would know the comforts and luxuries of.

For now their memories were occupied with the New Overworld, a place run with old and new, of time past and times to come. At first, they were sceptical, for they were told many stories of the cruelty of mortals, of humans like us who had suffered and pleaded for wishes from the Gods that never answered. They were told of a place filled with complications and just as much chaos as they were warned of.

But what Eret wasn't told of was the passion and happiness that our people felt when amongst those that we loved dearly, and the kindness of our people when one of our own was hurt. Eret was not told of how us mortals cared for our own, and the care we show to newcomers.

Newcomers like Eret.

And it was there, in the Overworld, where they learnt to love in other ways. Ways in which they'd never loved before. In the Overworld, they were finally given the answers to their questions, the *truth* of *everything*. Why life was created, and why chaos rampaged the Overworld; through all worlds. Why mortals were so complicated, and so easily broken. And finally, maybe why Eret's father was driven from their home.

Tormentor.

All the things that Eret remembered about their father, things they thought they knew about their father, was utterly false.

Destroyer of Worlds.

Gone was the gentle father they idolised. The one that protected them, took care of them, that promised them all the answers that they never got from him. Gone was the love they felt for someone that *lied* to them. And in its place, stood a mocking shell.

Murderer.

And they were left ever so lost. But with time, they began to remember the kindness their father gave, and they learnt to love him again, despite the tales us mortals fed them.

All was as it was.

Until it wasn't, and Eret was once again tossed into war and instability.

This time, they did not run, for the last time they ran, they lost *their home*. They lost *safety* and *care* and the feeling that *everything will be okay*. This time, they will not run, and they did not. They *fought*, in the face of everything that meant something to them.

But alas, they lost it all, to a person who claimed to be their friend.

Don't you remember me? He cried. All that Eret saw was a monster draped in the blood of Eret's people, and a monster that would soon take Eret's life.

Look at what you have done! Eret sobbed. *You killed my people! You* slaughtered *them*. They keeled over, in pain, and in grief.

Remember me, he pleaded, eyes glowing green.

Eret did not want to remember, for why would they want to remember a being that killed their community? *Their* people?

With a cry of rage, of desperation, Eret pushed themself up and grabbed their crying sword. They fought and scrambled. But with all that power, with all that rage, Eret still did not win. So they surrendered, but not without final words to spit.

Please, remember me. Remember us. He pleaded for one final time.

Eret kneeled before him, golden heart broken, innocence gone. *Kill me, you* ***monster***.

For Eret would rather die than face the being that caused such loss to their land. The loss of the people who gave themselves to a cause. The loss of the animals, unwillingly placed in a war that wasn't theirs. The loss of *life*, the cruel taking of it.

It shattered them to pieces, to know that they could do *nothing* to fix this.

And for some reason, the barbaric being spared them. And Eret knew that he wanted them to suffer the loss. Because when they woke from their seeping wounds, they realised that they had lost *everything*. A place, a palace, and a people that brought Eret comfort and happiness. A place now desolate and broken, with the blood of their people staining once pristine fields.

All gone.

It took them a long time to rebuild their land to glimmering colours, to bring themself back to a place where they could feel some semblance of comfort.

But they were lonely.

So, they seeked adventure, and they seeked for people to belong to, however different they may be to Eret.

And people they did find; in a budding nation so full of promise, and so full of joy. It was filled with stubborn, bullheaded people, with a decadent promise to change the world for the better.

There is a rising evil, they said, *and we are here to stop it.* And Eret, foolish, foolish Eret, who was so very attached to this nation, agreed to be one of the nation's people. And in that present, it seemed to be a good decision. After all, they craved comfort, familiarity, and of course, that is what they received with open arms.

But Eret, who did not know this land, was not aware of the pure *power* that this 'evil' held. No, this evil was not threatening, or at all seemingly malicious. But he held the world in the palm of his hands, and he was not afraid to destroy it. And Eret, who had been stripped of power, *craved* it.

Of course, they'd say it was for the better. To save people who couldn't be saved, because they didn't want to lose more people than he already had. And at first, perhaps it was for the better. And towards the end, it was for the better, but was it worth all the pain and suffering?

Perhaps not. To Eret, at least.

And so, with the idea of power, of the naive idea that having said power could save people, Eret struck a deal.

Please dear admin, grant me power, and in return I will do what you ask of me, they pleaded. *I have to have this,* they begged. They had to be able to help those that couldn't help themselves.

And this green man who held all the power in the world, paused. Pondered. Considered.

And then he smiled. *I will make you king,* he started, with that gentile, deceiving smile. And Eret, poor lost innocent Eret, who just wanted to help others, fell into the beginnings of a scheming trap.

But, the man with a cunning grin declared, *you will help me destroy L'Manberg.*

With that said, Eret's heart broke, for the third time in their everlasting life. They- They could not just do this. They could not destroy their home, not when they just found it.

But for the people, Eret did.

Needless to say, after that, Eret was not trusted. For the trading of a nation for a crown, others frowned upon; for the trade of a family in exchange for power was the worst one could do.

And like their father, Eret earned themself a name.

Betrayer.

The people that Eret was trying to save, scorned them. With time, they would come to learn that the crown they held had no power, and that they were only a figurehead of a land that was not theirs. It was a cage, one ornately decorated with obsidian and sapphire and wards of protection.

But we must ask, who was it protecting?

In the end, they tried to redeem themself, they really did. But no one wanted a betrayer in their midst, for fear that the betrayer would betray again.

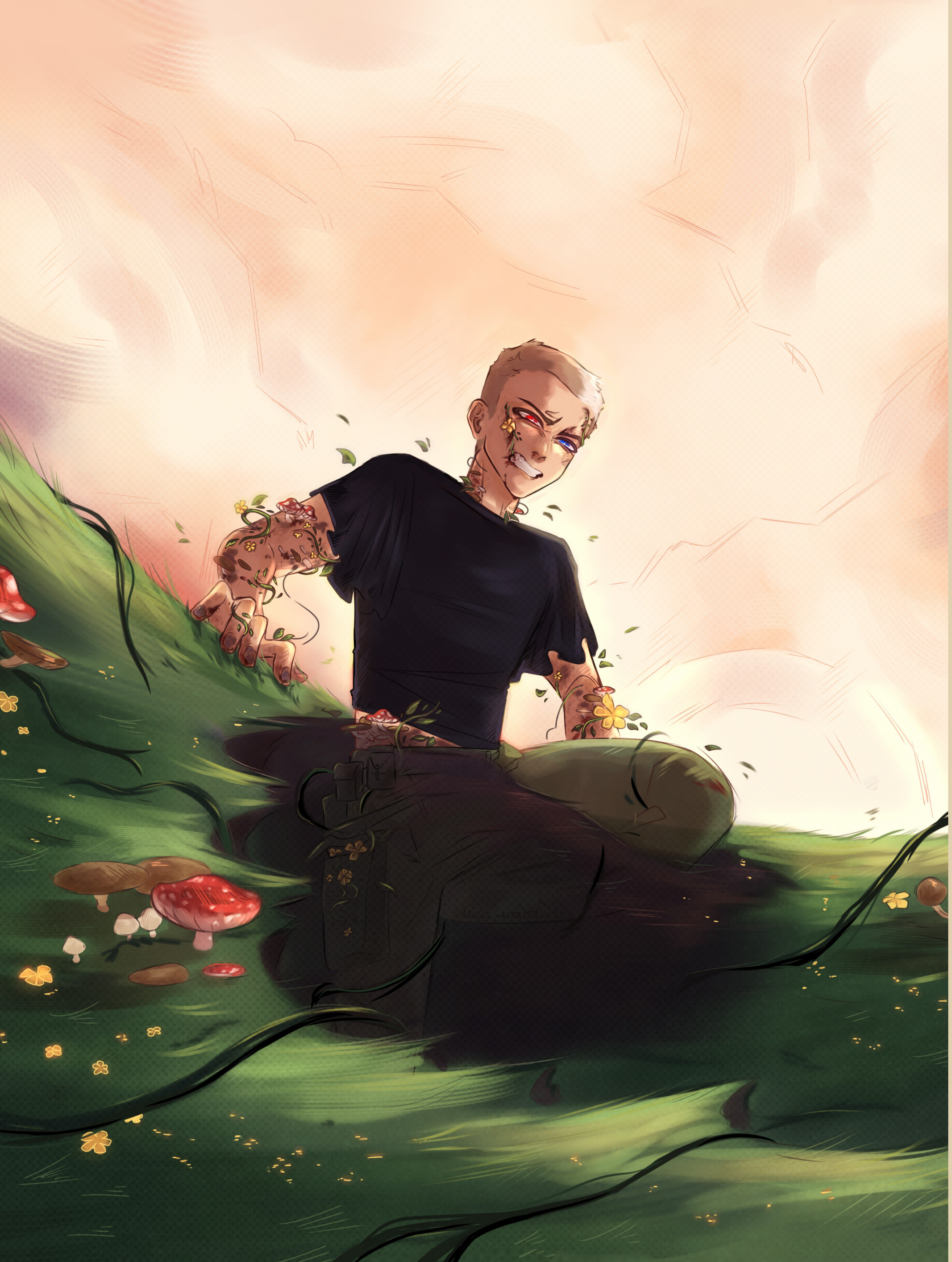
And betray again they did, for all they wanted was to succeed, and to have the power they naively believed to have helped people. They wanted to believe that they did everything for the greater good, but in order to do that, they needed to survive. And survive they shall.

So they betrayed the green man, escaped his wicked smile, and became their own evil. Once again, the world rocked beneath their feet, and tossed them away. They lost a home, a people and a person to follow. They lost themself, in their ideology that they could help the people.

The people did not agree.

So, they were alone.

And they would continue to be alone, for a long, long time.



The Man Who Fell Into Hell

THERE WAS ONCE a man who fell into hell. He had died, you see, hours before on the battlefield, and when his corpse sat up and began to walk around as if nothing had happened, the abyss got impatient. So when he stepped foot on the Prime Path hours later (a place closely connected to the gods, for when movement becomes a religious act and a temple is made of footpaths, the ground becomes holy quickly), the world split, and he fell.

There once was a man who fell into hell, and his name was Jack Manifold. He fell for seven days and seven nights, or for a thousand and one years, or for no more than five minutes. The point is not the span of time: the point is that he fell into hell, and he did not stop falling. He did not stop falling, that is, until he could take it no more, and decided he would simply not die. He was a stubborn man, the kind of stubbornness that is remembered in the stories and memorialized in the stars and lets a man bring himself back to life, so he succeeded—he dragged himself up through the void, he crawled back out into the land of the living, and he lay on the ground for a long while after, trying to remember how to breathe.

Jack Manifold lay in the soil beside the Prime Path, his fingers gripping the grass and his chest heaving, and the earth spoke to him.

Come back, it said, *come back to where you belong. Give yourself up to the dirt, child, to the worms and the roots and the strands of fungi that connect them all. You are so very lonely, and this is where you belong. Come back.*

But Jack was a stubborn man, and he refused. “I’m alive,” he insisted. “Look at me. I’m alive, and- and you can’t have me!”

We take everyone eventually, said the dirt and the worms and the roots and the strands of fungi that make up mycorrhizal pathways. *You will be no exception.*

When he woke up (because who wouldn’t fall asleep, after an ordeal like that?) he found roots growing around his wrists, mushrooms emerging from his unhealed wounds, stems and flowers and leaves woven through his fingers and limbs. “Get off of me!” he cried, and tore the plants off with desperate fingers, scrambling away from the spot where he had been. There was a divot in the dirt, one the same shape as his sleeping self, as if the ground had been trying to drag him down as he slept.

Sleep, said the earth, and though it had been foiled it bore no resentment, for something that is for so long has the patience of a million men. *Sleep, child, and we will ensure all your dreams are sweet. You will join us, and you will never be alone again.*

“I,” said Jack Manifold, furious, for he was young and impatient, “am not a fucking child!”

The ground did not reply. Even its silence, thought Jack, was condescending.

He was angry at the earth, but he was smart enough to fear it, too. It kept whispering, and he kept waking up to find plants growing on him, the tendrils of flowers and ivy and fungi wrapped around his arms and legs and torso. It became a morning routine, tearing away the strands enveloping him as he dressed. Sleeping further above the ground helped, so he did just that, moved his bed to be higher and higher, closer to the sky. *Further to fall,* said the abyss, and he told it to fuck off.

“Come to Snowchester,” said Tubbo, who had always been his friend, and there Jack Manifold found a place of snow and ice, a place where the only growing things needed constant care to survive.

Join us, said the earth.

“Leave me alone,” said Jack Manifold, and accepted Tubbo’s offer. He’d been right: though the sweet berry bushes reached out with their thorns whenever he passed, and he occasionally woke up to vines tapping against his window, it was better there, more bearable. There were even days—days where he only walked on ice so that the dirt could not sink under his feet, days where he ate meat like a starving man and would not touch a vegetable, days where he turned up his headphones loud loud loud and could pretend the voice in his mind was just a strange choice in a song—that he could pretend he had never fallen at all.

(Not truly. It was too hard to ignore the fact that he longer breathed, that he did not feel hungry or full no matter how much he ate, that he never became too cold or too hot no matter how long he stood out in the bitter snow. But the lie was comforting, at least.)

“I want to hurt Tommy,” said Niki to Jack, her eyes bright with hurt, fraying at the seams, burning up from inside. “I want to make him pay.”

The boy? asked the earth beneath her boots. *Oh, Revenge, there are so many things better worth your time. Stitch yourself up before you start tearing others apart. When will you animals learn?*

“Me too,” said Jack, staring Niki in the eyes, refusing to look at the ground. “I want revenge too.”

Jack knew the nukes were going to work even before they tested them. The ground told him so, cursed Tubbo as a destroyer of worlds, pleaded with Jack to destroy each of the *bitter poisonous seed capsules their toxins are seeping into our roots they will end us all please child please.* He’d swiped the card with satisfaction burning deep in his bones, the knowledge that his deed would hurt both of his tormentors at once: Tommy, and the earth they’d bury him in.

But the blood still drained from his face as he followed Tubbo to the crater and beheld the devastation waiting for them. The hole had torn down into the deepest recesses of the ground, and the call of the abyss was louder than ever. For a moment, he could not even bring himself to care about Tommy still being alive, running towards them healthy as ever with Niki lagging behind, fury in her every movement, not with the sound ringing in his ears-

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"No!" he said out loud, trying to step away, but the roots had already grown around his boots, his feet sinking into the ground. "No!" he cried again, pulling himself free, pacing frantically to avoid the earth's clutches.

"*Yes!*" shouted Tubbo, far ahead, oblivious to Jack's plight as he took in what he'd done, what he'd made, arms outstretched as if to show the gods themselves the crater.

Jack retreated, fled the scene, practically threw himself onto the ice at Snowchester, and once he was safe on the water from the dirt trying to tug him down, screamed to try and drown out the voices.

He told Tubbo that he'd found a rip in his radiation suit and had been forced to leave so early, had been screaming in joy at their success. He told Niki that he'd been so angry at Tommy still being alive that he'd fled before he could do something drastic, had been screaming out of rage at their failure. He was lying to them both, of course, but he could barely focus enough to care over the call of the earth.

He did not tell Tommy anything. He could not stand to look him in the eyes.

* * *

Then Tommy died-

"Dead?" he heard himself say, "what do you mean, dead?"

Coming to join us, whispered the earth, *Life's sunshine boy. Oh, he'll miss the light, that one, but sunflowers will grow from his corpse and turn to greet the dawn in his stead.*

He couldn't bring himself to believe it, not really. Tommy, dead? Still, he changed the signs on the hotel, visited all the graves he could find to leave flowers behind, and whispered to the rising sun, "I forgive you. I'm sorry."

-and Tommy came back.

"Alive?" he heard himself say. "Back? But-"

This time, though, the earth was eerily silent, a petulant absence of sound, and that was all the proof Jack needed.

He'd expected Tommy to try to move into the hotel right away, start sleeping on the top floor like Jack did. That little hobbit-hole of his would never work, not for escaping the embrace of the ground, would probably cave in and crush him to bury him once and for all.

But Tommy never left, and the house never collapsed, and after a few days Jack couldn't hold himself back any longer. *Curiosity kills the cat, but surely being reborn gets you another nine lives,* he thought, and found himself creeping up the path, found himself sneaking in, found-

Found that the legs of his bed stood solidly on the floor. That was what Jack noticed first: that the bed hadn't sunk from the ground trying to swallow it, not like his had. There were no vines creeping on the walls, no pale strands of mycelium reaching out, no plants at all other than an almost completely wilted flower in a pot sitting by the furnace.

"What?" he whispered, and the earth replied, speaking from all around him.

Hello, child, it said, full of a surprised sort of glee, *what are you doing here? Come to join us at last?* The walls began to bristle, the floor sinking under his feet, the ceiling shaking. *Oh, we have waited so long for this day!*

"Wha- No!" he exclaimed, retreating, inching towards the door, feeling like a broken record. "I'm not! Leave me alone!" And then, quiet, confused, a little hurt, "Why aren't you trying to take him, too?"

Oh, said the earth, *what, the boy? Someone else thought to put a claim on him, returned him to the world right and proper. He's not ours anymore, child, not like you.*

"I am not," Jack Manifold said through gritted teeth, a bitter envy growing in his chest, red-hot and dangerous, "a fucking child."

And then he turned tail and ran.

* * *

He woke up a few weeks later with plants growing through his hands.

He didn't realize at first—he was tired, barely conscious, and desperately in need of coffee. He only figured it out when he'd reached out for the hotel's ladder and found himself unable to reach it, arms stopping short.

"Wha-?" Jack said, and blinked. His jaw dropped.

There were plants growing through his hands.

His eyes widened, and he turned to stare around the room—his room in the hotel, high off the ground, supposed to be *safe*.

It was covered in plant life, vines covering the walls, tree branches creeping through the windows, flowers fucking everywhere. Some of those vines (the smaller ones, thank Prime) were wrapped around his fingers and palms and wrists, twisting in and out of the skin where necessary.

Hello, child, said the hivemind of the earth, the pathways of the mycorrhizal consciousness echoing through his room, sounding pleased and pleasant. *Good morning!*

There was no blood, no pain, no physical sensation to it at all other than a dull pressure. It would have been better, Jack thought, if it *had* hurt.

He screamed, then, in fear and in rage. He tore at his arms, cutting the vines with his nails, ignoring their cries of pain in his head. He dug them out of his skin, and once he was free and unattached, he grabbed his axe from the chest by his bed, and leapt from the open window.

Oh, it wasn't pleasant hitting the ground. Of course it wasn't. But he wasn't human anymore, hadn't been for a long time, and he could still walk on broken legs, just like how he could still use his hands and arms even with the holes the plants had made in them.

He didn't feel pain anymore. He hadn't since his death.

Jack Manifold screamed again at the earth, furious and grieving and *hurting*, even if he couldn't technically physically do that any more, and swung his axe.

The earth screamed in his ears. He screamed back.

"What," Tommy exclaimed two days later, still trying to fight for the hotel back, "did you do to the fucking lawn, bitch?"

Jack looked around at the razed plant life, at how every green thing on the land around the hotel had been cut down with an axe or burnt to a crisp with a flint and steel, and his tongue found the gap in his teeth where one of his molars had been shoved out of place by tendrils of fungi that morning. "None of your business, is it?" he said, a challenge, and noticed with some satisfaction how his boots weren't sinking into the charred earth—not yet, anyway. "It's my hotel, after all."

"What d'you mean, *your hotel-*" Tommy began, incensed, as the earth cried, *We just want to help you, child, just want to bring you home-*

"Oh, fuck off," he said to them both.

* * *

Burning the plants didn't work forever, of course, and the earth only got stronger after the egg up and died, less of its power focused on fighting the intrusive red vines. Jack stopped sleeping after that day at the hotel, though it didn't stop the plants from trying to claim him.

In fact, they started wrapping around and through him during waking moments, too, and since he didn't have the strength to tell others, living others, why, he spent less and less time around people. He kept himself busy, working day and night, the voice of the ground becoming so familiar to him that he began to have difficulty telling it apart from his own thoughts.

He began to build a new country, one he called New Manifold Land, after everything he'd lost.

It's futile, you know, said the earth. *Everything rots eventually, child: crumbles and falls, even this country that you think will preserve your legacy.*

Still, he didn't stop, even though he was building in the desert, where his boots were tugged downwards more easily than almost anywhere else. It was an act of defiance at best, a desperate last stand at worst, no matter how much he tried to think of it as just yet another battle in an ongoing war.

Why not just give up? asked the earth. *Why not let yourself rest?*

"You know what they say," replied Jack Manifold, ripping desert marigolds free from his legs and pulling strands of ocotillo out from his chest. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

* * *

He encountered Wilbur while visiting the hotel, because apparently that guy'd managed to come back from the afterlife with the same infuriating lack of consequences as Tommy, and found himself pleasantly surprised by his apology.

And then Dream broke out of prison, and Ranboo was dead, and Niki stood in front of him and confessed that the former, at least, was at least partially her fault.

Jack forgave her, of course, as he'd forgiven Wilbur, no matter how much her words bit at his soul. He had so few friends left, nowadays.

We will be your friend, whispered the ground, and the limbs of a nearby tree coiled around his upper body like a hug. *We will make sure you are never alone.*

"I don't need you," he said, wrestling himself free.

You're lying, it said, sounding pleasantly surprised, and he found that he was. Maybe that would have scared him more if he wasn't so exhausted—not the exhaustion of sleep deprivation, mind, for he hadn't felt that since he'd died, but the bone-deep kind he'd become well-accustomed to in the past few months.

He was so tired.

"Shut up," Jack Manifold told the earth, and it did—left him in peace, blissful quiet, for the first time in months for the rest of the day.

For some reason, it didn't feel like much of a victory.

* * *

There once was a man who fell into hell, and his name was Jack Manifold. This was not the entirety of his story, of course, nor even the most important part of it, but it is the part that people tend to remember: that Jack Manifold died.

Sometimes, even that part of the story seemed to even overshadow the bit where he came back.

It must be understood that not one of the people around Jack knew what had happened, not Tommy or Wilbur or Tubbo or even Niki. Perhaps he didn't tell them, or perhaps when he tried to, they didn't listen. It doesn't really matter, since the story still ends the same either way.

There once was a man who fell into hell, and his name was Jack Manifold. But Jack Manifold was a stubborn sort of man, the kind that pulled himself out of the earth and taught himself how to breathe again after, who stitched closed his wounds even though they no longer bled, who slept even though it had become so unnecessary to his being that he hated to do it.

There once was a man who fell into hell, but his name was Jack Manifold, and so he dragged himself out of it. The earth, the rightful owner of his body and soul, didn't like that very much, and so it tried to take him back, tried to convince him to be buried, tried to lure him into the casket to finally rest.

But Jack Manifold was a stubborn man.

Of course you are, said the earth, in a way that would have felt patronizing if it wasn't quite so earnest. *You wouldn't be here if you weren't, walking and talking and mimicking a living man.*

"I'm not mimicking anything," Jack said, tired, incredibly, unbearably tired, but awake all the same. "I'm fully aware of who and what I am, thank you."

Of course you are, said the earth again, and this time it was *definitely* patronizing.

"Screw off," said Jack, picking at his fingernails. There were strands of fungi growing under them, something white and mycorrhizal, and if he didn't keep an eye on it, strands began growing between his fingers, tying them together to grow mushrooms at the joining points. He was sick of having to wrench his fingers apart to use them, and of the indignation of the fungi when he got rid of perfectly good spore carriers. *If they were truffles,* said the earth, a tantalizing aroma wafting just under Jack's nose, *would you appreciate them more?*

"No," he said shortly, and kept walking.

He'd been done building for a while now, at that point, done distracting himself with strange places and stranger people, and the server felt too quiet. He had nothing to occupy himself with, and so he walked: walked, and walked, and walked. His muscles didn't ache, and his boots had fallen apart a while back, so he'd left them in the dirt. Grass and flowers and mushroom caps grew where he walked, though it didn't really matter—he wouldn't have felt pain even if his feet *had* torn themselves open on the ground.

He didn't know where he was going, not until he got there: not until he stood over the crater of L'Manberg, watching the vines creep out of the pit and approach him. They curled around him gently, pulling him down, and he let them, until he was standing on one of the ledges overlooking the water.

"Oh," he said, and paused for an eternity. Finally: "I was always going to end up here, wasn't I?"

Yes, said the earth.

"I died for this place," said Jack Manifold as he sat, legs dangling over the edge. The earth rose up to meet him, flowering tendrils creeping around his arms, fungi wrapping their hyphae around his abdomen, the rock beneath him sinking just slightly. "Died for her, and for her people, even after I tried to escape. I seceded, you know."

Yes, said the earth.

"But it didn't matter," said Jack.

No, said the earth, as roots dug through his skin, as grass bristled along his arms, as a gigantic mushroom cap broke through his skull, pushing towards the sky. *Not even a little.*

"Oh," he said, reaching up to touch the mushroom, which covered his head like some sort of macabre hat, and remembered a long ago discussion with a delighted Tommy and a disgusted Wilbur about the zombie ant fungus, *Ophiocordyceps*. "Did you do this? Make me an ant, control my brain, bring me to the lowest point you could to drag me down?"

Of course not, the earth replied, sounding almost indignant. *The fungus you are speaking of does not control the brain, just the muscles.*

"Great," said Jack, sarcastic.

But we would not have done that even if we could, added the earth hastily. *You have always had free will. You always will.*

"Oh," Jack said again, as a flower burst through the skin of his cheek, obstructing his vision. He brushed it away, annoyed, but it just bounced back—the persistence of nature, he supposed. "But you literally tried to drag me to hell."

Just because you should have the ability to fight, said the earth, sounding somewhat angry and somewhat resigned and somewhat grudgingly respectful, *does not mean you should be able to win.*

"But I did win," he said. "For a while, at least. I beat you."

Yes, it replied, *you did.*

Jack sat there for a long time, watching the water as the earth wrapped itself around him. The sun rose, and soared high in the sky, and then began to fall. It was dark in the crater well before it was outside of it, but he could look up and see the streaks of the sunset overhead, the sky painted orange and yellow and red.

He was tired. He'd been tired for a long time now, of course, but when Jack had sat down for the first time in what felt like an eternity and what actually had been, he realized, a couple of weeks, he'd felt the exhaustion in his bones, a weight dragging him down, down, down.

Jack Manifold wanted to sleep. Better yet, he wanted to *rest*, once and for all.

"I don't want to be alone again," he said, a demand and a confession and a hand outstretched to make a deal. "Never again."

And you never will, the world told him, and he finally allowed himself to succumb to its embrace.

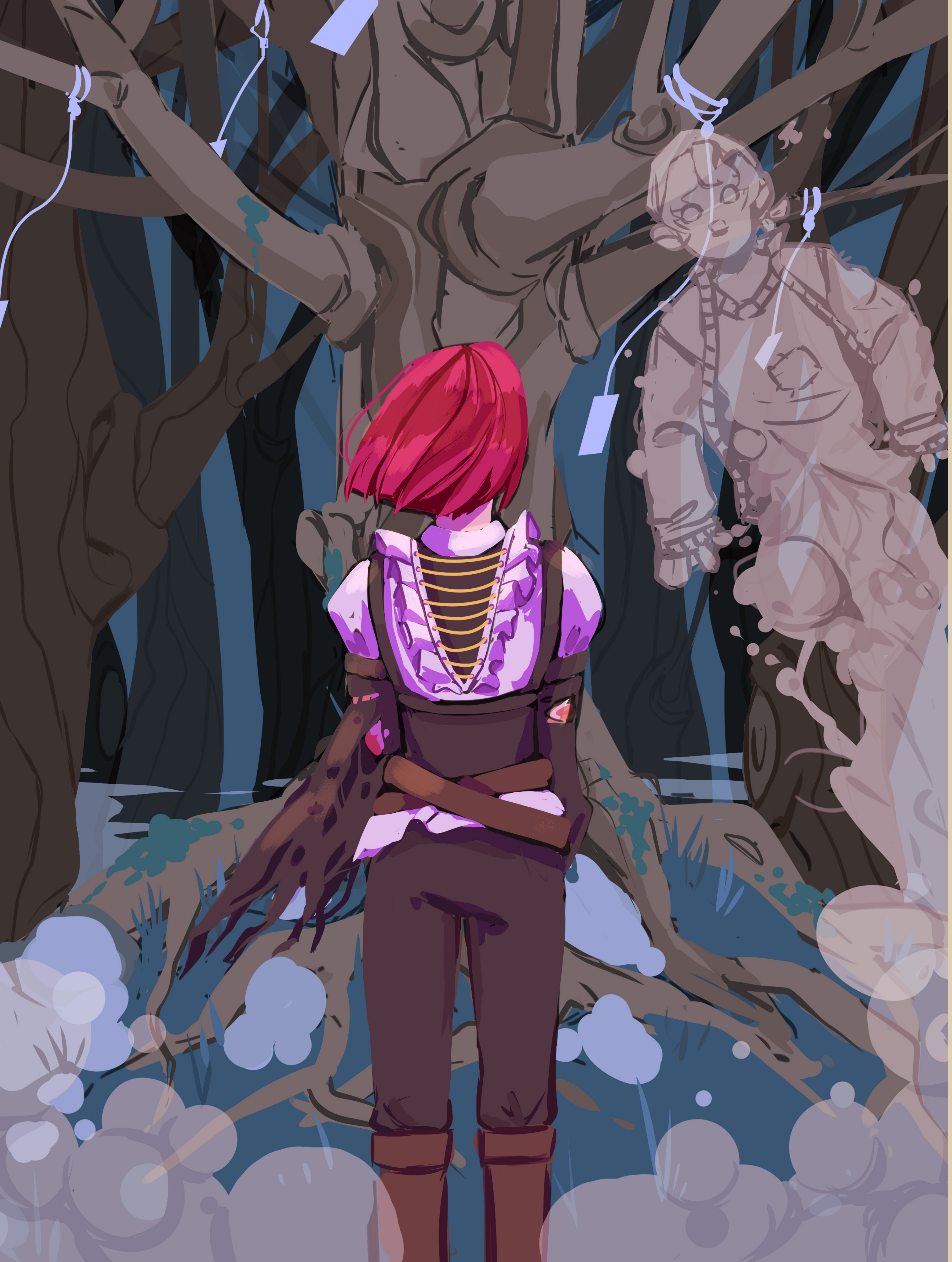
There once was a man who fell into hell, and his name was Jack Manifold. There was also a man who tore himself free, and a man who granted himself a second chance at life out of sheer stubbornness, and a man who managed to force the earth itself to let him live a little longer, and they were all named Jack Manifold, too. But they don't matter, now, not here, not long after the end of things.

If you wander long enough, let your feet guide you and not your mind, follow the path of running water and edible organisms and dry places to sleep, you might reach a place that has long since become overgrown, reclaimed by nature and time. You might see structures and shacks and statues there, haunting things so tall as to scrape the sky, or so short as to seem like monsters crouched low to the ground, about to pounce. You might see books and swords and paintings there, precious things left behind by people of long ago. You might see a church and a bench and a path there, holy things desecrated by the unstoppable nature of the world.

You would most definitely see a crater, a deep, jagged cut taken out of the ground, with water at its bottom from both the waterfalls running over the side and half a million rainfalls, with plants growing all around it and even dangling from the sides, with a worn flag pole standing in the center, the flag it bore having long since rotted away.

And if you leaned over the side far enough, or dared to climb down into its depths, you would see a ledge over the water, beside one of the waterfalls, and on that ledge you would see a figure. He would be made up of stone and dirt and crystal, plants and fungi and slime, lichen dotting his lower legs and red and blue flowers growing where his eyes should be and a mushroom sprouting from his skull, releasing spores to the open air.

He would not be alive, of course, but you need not be afraid of or for him. He cannot harm you, nor would he, not anymore. His name is Jack Manifold, you see, and he is finally resting.



Revenge and What it Does to You

GODHOOD STARTS WITH a thought. Something thick and oozing, darkening the edges of a person's vision and resting sluggishly on the brain. It's all-consuming, this thought, this beginning of the divine, and it eats away at everything good until there is nothing left but an impression. A shadow of something that was once called human.

Revenge is not a person. No longer is she named Niki, no longer does she bake in an oven she built with her own two hands, no longer does she play chess under the stars with rebels and heretics. All she is now is a husk of her former self— a god. One whose heart is pumped by violence and lungs are choked by rage, searching for purpose where there is none.

It is thousands of years before modernity in this story, when the earth was still new and history was told in months, not millennia. Revenge stands before the blackened remains of a tree, staring at the still-smoldering ash. Scars lattice her skin and red flesh peeks through tears in her uniform.

The uniform. Once decorated with a nation's hard-won colors, it now clings to Revenge's frame with no colors at all, blackened by divinity and fire. It is a timestamp, a reminder of an age long gone, but she doesn't know that. She won't ever know that.

Revenge is a wanderer, cursed to track paths through ruins and wilds for a destiny she will never grasp. *Tommyinnit*, she seethes, passing by a bakery that stinks of spoiled dough and missed opportunities.

Death, she promises, and with her gaze fixed upon the horizon she doesn't see where Niki's body earned the right to be buried.

Fire, she fumes, the landscape passing by in a blur, shifting colors and days bleeding into one another as immortality pushes her ever forward. Whatever she used to recognize in these places is long gone. Only ghosts and plants are left.

Revenge meets Bitterness by the seaside, her familiar red hair tangled by the wind and an angry twist nestled in the curl of her perfect lips.

“You’re late,” Bitterness says to her, wet hands firmly locked beneath the tug of the waves. If she were any more distant, she would float right on by. *“I waited for you.”*

“You don’t wait for anything.”

“There is a first time for everything, old friend.”

Some will call this woman Wanderlust, or Careful, or maybe even Beautiful— but Revenge knows the truth. Bitterness is her sister, and Revenge would not meet *Beautiful* on wet rocks backlit by moonshine.

“I’m going to kill him,” Revenge promises. *“I’m going to kill him, and he’s going to suffer.”*

“And I was going to burn your country to the ground,” Bitterness bites back. *“Don’t lie to me, Niki. It doesn’t look good on you.”*

Niki is not her name anymore. Niki would have smiled, taken her sister’s arm and set a place for her at the dinner table. If Niki was still her name, she would remember that the woman before her once had a baby— a bright, gentle little thing, with orange hair and grabbing hands, and a happiness that seemed to have been leeched out of his beautiful, tired mother. But things are different by the sea, so Revenge does not recognize the name that should have made her human.

When she stands, Revenge does not say goodbye to Bitterness. They part ways with violence resting heavily on their tongues and thoughts stained black with hate, their rusted words held back not out of love or fondness but simply because there is no need to speak when godly ichor rots their veins. Bitterness slips back into the sea and Revenge carries on like nothing ever happened. Her shoes will be crusted with salt for a hundred years, but never will she lift her feet to check.

Revenge is governed by blind instinct rather than rational thought. Observe, process, act, repeat— that’s all she is now, shattered fractions of humanity and god and half-life spreading through her body like a web, a fractal folding in on itself. It’s not her fault, the lack of change, not in any way that matters, but the result is the same nonetheless: No rest until the rot is satisfied. Find Tommy or walk until the earth itself is worn away.

Revenge meets Hubris in the forest, standing at the roots of a great oak tree. Roses puddle at her feet— red, pink, white— while blood from her back drips steadily into the dirt. Her hands are withered. Her eyes are cold.

“I don’t know you,” Hubris says, and it’s probably true. *“You shouldn’t be here.”*

“I’m just passing through,” Revenge lies, and this time the woman standing before her cannot tell the difference between truth and fiction. *“I’ll be gone soon.”*

“Have you seen him?”

“Tommy?”

“No. God.”

Revenge does not know about the wingless fairy that haunts the woods. She does not know that a god with a name that doesn’t mean anything walks these forests too, so Revenge cannot answer Hubris’ question. She can only stare with apathy and let her feet take her down another path.

Millions upon millions of years ago when the world was new and something called humanity was naught but an idea, this continent knit itself together. It pushed and pulled and fought, magma bubbling ever-so-slowly on a scale mortality cannot comprehend and finally colliding to form this vast and stretching place that so many creatures have called home. Stories say it’s endless, only parting around the great seas and folding back in on itself beyond the horizon. (And it is, in a way, to Revenge. The rock and dirt and snow and everything else is woven together like an afghan, unfurling in front of her and rolling itself up behind her heel. Endless, because she cannot see where ends meet and start the cycle anew. Endless, because infinity is just another word for *ignorant*.)

Revenge meets War in a dirty ravine, standing in an arena carved of rock that holds itself together out of sheer will alone. He leans against the wall and lazily tosses an axe hand to hand as though he's been torn straight from an old fairytale ballad.

"Hello," she greets, the taste of iron burning holes in her mouth. *"Why are you underground?"*

"Dunno. Why do you smell like smoke?"

She shrugs.

"Did you know that octopi have wars?" War asks with a tilt of his head. *"Underwater battles that last for days, the little things killing each other for food, territory, what have you. Isn't it funny, how universal violence is?"*

"Fire and death are universal and that's not a revelation. Just tell me where Tommy is."

"I think we were human, once," he says, the axe gripped between his fingers gleaming in the lamplight. *"Do you remember? Do you remember what we were, what we did? I don't."*

"No. I'm here for Tommy."

Revenge and War stand side-by-side in the history books, their ink smudged and clothes billowing in stenciled wind. They look strong, powerful, and the tiny pieces of their myths that survived time's corroding hand created ripples powerful enough to destroy gods. Their real names and human deeds are lost, and perhaps that is for the best. Holy reverence is not the best way to mourn Niki and Technoblade.

Cool moonlight hits Revenge's face when she crawls out of the ravine, pale blue and filtered through foliage. She should feel something about this, should tip her head up to the heavens and taste the sugar in the air. Instead, her path stretches westward and the forest is ignored.

Revenge meets Forgiveness in a broken mansion, cobwebs in every corner and moths eating away at all the cloth. Wind whistles and monsters murmur, the dead tundra a lonely, desolate place not meant to be a home. But still, Forgiveness lingers.

"Where is he?" Revenge demands, desperate and angry. *"Where is Tommy?"*

"Tommy is gone. Ranboo is gone. I am gone."

"You know where he is."

"I forgive you," Forgiveness parrots. *"It's okay. I forgive you."*

"Fuck you!"

They go back and forth like this for hours, their words never powerful enough to pierce their twin godly ignorance. Forgiveness repeats the same words over and over again and perhaps, to the outside eye, it looks like only one of them has lost control of their mind. But Revenge is just as dead as he is, so they bicker.

And bicker.

And *bicker*.

The wind changes, a breeze carried from the mountains beyond and tinged with something warm brushing soft fingers over the top of Revenge's head.

"I'm fucking leaving," she decides arbitrarily. *"Don't expect me to come back."*

"Oh. That's okay. I'm sorry."

She doesn't bother to grace him with a goodbye.

They'll do this again someday, of course, and still they will not realize their own madness. Forgive, argue, move on, repeat. Not even death can stop their sorry cycle.

Revenge meets Sacrifice in an empty castle. The crown on their head glints in the cold torchlight, and though Revenge is blind to it, there is a sadness in their eyes that shows recognition in place of mindless haze. Sacrifice is not like the others. They know what they have become, and it is too horrifying to put into words.

"Where is Tommy?" Revenge asks, sneering, not understanding why there's an extra bite to her words when she speaks to them. (There's a distant inkling, of course, a shadow of crowns and presidents and words that don't mean anything anymore in this new age. But it's not enough to scrape her rusted, rotted mind, so Revenge doesn't care.)

"I don't know."

"You're lying!"

"Why would I lie, when all I know is to give up? You are dead, goddess of the broken people. Violence will not make your rotten heart pump."

"Spare the fucking poetry. Just give me Tommy."

"Go back," they say, tired and aching to say things they know Revenge won't hear. *"You always do. Go back to where you started."*

Perhaps in another world, where things are not quite as cruel and gods can change, Revenge and Sacrifice could have been friends. They could've walked side-by-side, shared existence like a torchfire and made death bearable by being two, not one. Sacrifice could forget. Revenge could forgive.

Unfortunately, it is not another world and they are not going to change. Revenge slams the castle doors on her way out and Sacrifice sags back in their meaningless throne. The castle is empty. The continent is infinite.

There is a tree standing beside a crater. It smells of smoke and death, this tree, and nobody alive remembers its name. By all accounts it should be just another landmark Revenge uncaringly passes by, not even enough to be a footnote in the story she thinks she's writing for herself.

But when she crests the hill it stands upon, intent on trekking ever forward, there's someone sitting calmly at its base. His lips are cracked, the sleeves of his uniform are torn to shreds, and parts of his skin are peeling away to reveal dull red flesh underneath. A guitar rests in his lap. Its strings are cut and there's faded scuffs on its body where stickers used to be, last little bits of personality gone and leaving behind nothing but glue stains.

His name is Tragedy. Revenge stops in front of him.

This isn't a meeting, not really, but there's no word big enough to capture what it is so meeting must suffice.

"Hello, stranger," he says to her with no tongue at all, *"What are you doing in my country?"*

"Searching."

"People tend to do that here."

Again, language fails to describe the impossible thing this little moment is, isn't, should be, shouldn't be. How could words convey the horror of forgetting and the misery of ghosts that have been stripped of even their names? Revenge and Tragedy— connected, tied together, despite the divinity seeping through their pores.

"Tommy. Do you know him?"

"No," Tragedy promises. It's sincere. *"My nation. Have you heard of it?"*

"No."

"Then I suppose we are at an impasse."

"I guess we are."

"Do you want to hear a song I'm working on?" He asks.

Revenge should say no. She has work to do, more places to search, a half-life to live. Another god who cannot answer her only question isn't worth the time wasted.

"Sure, why not?" She says, settling cross-legged on the barren earth.

Tragedy smiles and adjusts his grip on the guitar, shuffling closer to her. Everything about it is correct— where his fingers touch the neck, the way he cradles the instrument so perfectly lovingly, even the hunch of his shoulders paint the model picture of a taught-and-learned performer.

But his name is Tragedy for a reason.

"You ready?"

"Go on, musician."

He takes a deep breath and strums empty air. No sound comes out but the soft sigh of air passing over the open guitar hole. Tragedy frowns. He strums it again. And again.

Nothing.

"That was underwhelming."

"I'm sorry."

She's probably supposed to offer advice here, or help him, but she just stares with mild curiosity as he fiddles with the useless instrument. The sun, slowly crawling up the eastern horizon, bathes the scene in a golden glow: Revenge, wasting her time picking at dead grass, and Tragedy, trying to tune a guitar despite not knowing how. Poetic, probably, if actions spit into the universe and shaped into something meaningful by coincidence alone counts as poetry.

"I have to go," she says, standing up. The moment is over.

"Stay?" He asks.

Revenge shakes her head. *"Tommy. Come with me?"*

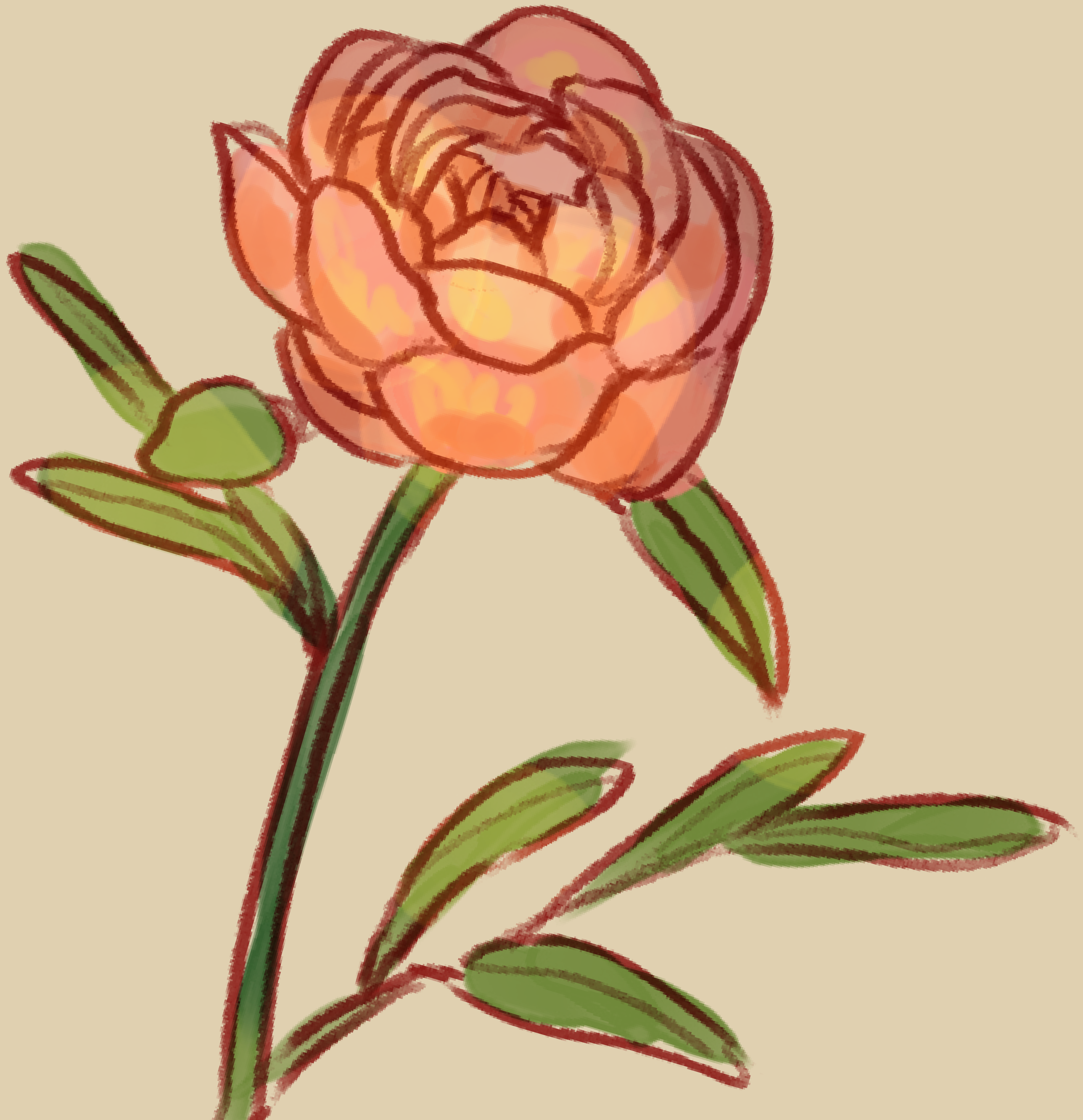
Tragedy smiles sadly and gestures to the ruin surrounding him. *"My nation."*

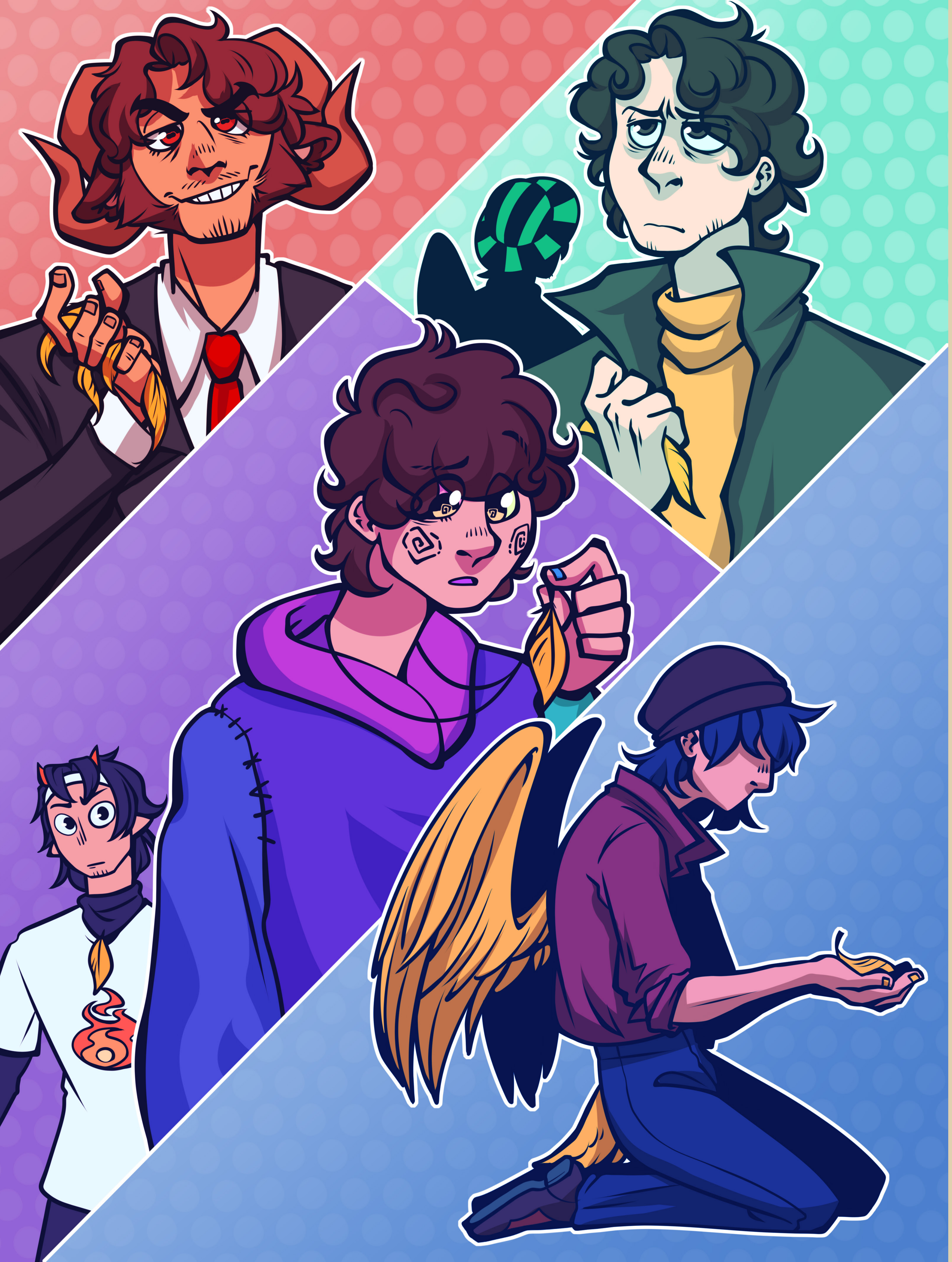
"Hm. Then goodbye, musicless musician."

"Goodbye, stranger."

Perhaps the universe isn't quite as lonely as it seems to be. Meet again, it says, not gentle, not angry, but beautifully steady. *Do not know the things that made you animals nor the life you lived before, but meet again. Meet again. Meet again.*

And for Revenge, that is funeral enough.





Lucky Duck

QUACKITY WAS BORN with golden wings.

All duck hybrids are, to be fair. When Quackity hatched, he was the runt. He was smaller than his clutch-mates, and a sickly child; his parents worried when his wings molted and didn't fade to brown like they should have. They coddled him, took him to doctors who specialized in avian hybrids, trying to find the problem, but they never did.

Quackity was merely a boy with golden wings, and that was that.

Though his feathers were made of pure gold instead of keratin, he could've still learned to fly, but he never got the chance. His parents, fascinated, began to notice how Quackity always seemed to win at games of chance and how he could beat anyone at cards, and when his father won the lottery one day while carrying a stack of feather-strewn pillowcases to the laundromat, they discovered what the key to his good fortune was.

They took him to a soothsayer. She looked Quackity up and down—still a small, sickly child, barely older than seven and with wings not yet big enough to glide with—and smiled.

"*This boy is blessed,*" she said, gazing at his plumage with hunger. "*Blessed by Tyche herself.*"

His parents paid her in a handful of his molted feathers, and for the first time, Quackity felt afraid as the grown-ups murmured to each other and cast his wings longing glances. He awoke the next morning with his feathers trimmed painfully to the quick, and to his parents celebrating the purchase of a brand-new horse.

For the first time, Quackity fled in terror.

Years passed, and Quackity learned to keep his wings hidden. Avian magic allows minor shapeshifting to beings that carry it in their blood, allowing them to grow and shrink their wings by small margins. Quackity kept his wings as small as he could—albeit it being painful and anxiety-inducing—and kept them bound, hidden under his shirt away from prying eyes and greedy hands. By the time he was seventeen, Quackity had fled from dozens of towns after people tried to pluck his feathers out of desire and greed, but when he was nineteen, he stumbled across a new land.

A land ruled by a man named Dream, who smiled and said that this was a place where hybrids of all kinds were welcome.

A land where a man named Wilbur Soot smiled and complimented him, not on his beauty, but on his brains, and where a man with ram's horns and a boastful grin offered him everything he could ever dream of.

"I wish for Schlatt to love me," Quackity said, gazing at the freshly molted feather in his palm, even though he knew wishing on his own feathers didn't work.

And yet, it did. Days later, Schlatt asked for his hand in marriage, and they were wed the day of the election, in high spirits and singing each other's praises.

"What is it that gives you your power?" Schlatt asked that evening, in their wedding chambers over a glass of wine. "Is it your beauty, my love? Your wit?"

"My feathers," Quackity replied, blushing and combing a hand through his primaries. "People fight over them. When I molt, people can wish on them. They always come true—well, I can't. When I try to wish on my own feathers, things always end badly."

A strange kind of hunger sparked in Schlatt's eyes. "How so? Are your wings blessed, or are you?"

Quackity's eyes narrowed. "Do you love them more than me?"

"Oh, heavens no," Schlatt chuckled, swirling the wine around in his glass and kissing Quackity's hand. "How could I love the wings and not their bearer? I will always love you, Pumpkin."

Quackity smiled. "I love you as well."

He was happy. He'd finally met someone who loved him for his heart, not his blessing.

Oh, how wrong he was.

The months wore on, and with it, the stress of the presidency. Schlatt drank more, the people ate less, and discontent rose every time someone else was banished. The threat of Wilbur Soot loomed over the cabinet like a dark shadow, and Schlatt grew bitter.

"Sugar Pumpkin!" He yelled on the eve of the Red Festival, voice slurring and the reek of liquor heavy on his breath. "I need a feather!"

"I'm not molting, Schlatt." Quackity tried to soothe him. "You'll need to wait until next month."

Rage blazed in his husband's eyes, fueled by whiskey and vitriol. "Do you love me?"

Quackity faltered. "Of course."

"Then give me a feather!" Schlatt roared, lurching towards him with startling speed for someone so intoxicated. "Tomorrow *needs* to go right, and you're the key!"

He was too quick.

Quackity cried out in agony as Schlatt grasped a handful of feathers and *yanked*, tearing out a few of his coverts. Blood welled at the wounds, and Quackity staggered back, reflexive tears brimming in his eyes.

"What the *fuck*!" He snarled.

"Thank you," Schlatt cackled, shaking the bloody feathers in his fist as he limped away. "Thank you, Sugar. I wish for my bastard son to *die*!"

For the first time, Quackity begged for his luck to fail.

It didn't. Tubbo died in a sunburst of firework sparks and flames, and

Quackity cried that night. He cried, knowing a child had died at his hands. He begged Tyche, the Fates, any god that would listen, to never let anything like that happen again.

No one came. No one listened.

Every night, Schlatt would come home drunk and angry, ranting about dissenters, traitors, people trying to steal his power. Every night Quackity would try to calm him, and every night, Schlatt would rip handfuls of feathers from his wings.

Quackity's feathers grew dull, patchy. Had he known how to fly before, he would've been grounded by now.

And then one night, it became too much.

"Do it, pussy," Schlatt hissed on the steps of the White House, pickaxe in one hand and a golden feather in the other, sneering at the knife in Quackity's trembling grip. "C'mon, do it. I *wish* you'd do it. I don't think you have the balls."

All Quackity could see was red, after that.

Red on his clothes.

Red on his hands.

Red on Schlatt's face as he gasped like a fish, a dark river of blood pouring from the gash in his throat.

"Your wish is yours to keep," Quackity choked, shuddering with rage and silent sobs as he ripped the wedding ring from his finger and dropped it on the corpse. "And I want a divorce. Asshole."

The red stayed.

It stayed on his hands as he fled to Pogtopia. It stayed in his clothes as he fell to his knees at Wilbur's feet, begging for mercy.

It stayed, flowing from the wounds on his tattered, balding wings as Niki bandaged them, soothing him, *praising* him for finally gaining the strength to escape his tormentor, his abuser.

Quackity didn't feel worthy of it. Wilbur sang his praises anyway.

"You are beautiful," Wilbur murmured, on a late night when they got high for the upteenth time together, on substances Tommy had smuggled in that Techno would've confiscated, had he found them. "You're an angel. If I were Icarus, I would fly to you, not the sun."

"And I would burn you all the same," Quackity replied, trying not to cry, trying not to love, to feel loved by the man whose arms wrapped warm around him. Wilbur's love was insincere, born from the unholy union of drugs and desperation, and it would always be. There was no *philia*, there was merely *eros* and infatuation, a mutual sense of anguish as they tried and failed to fill the cracks marring the porcelain of their souls.

That night, Quackity let Wilbur help him preen his wings. That night, he pressed a stray feather into Wilbur's hands, begging him to wish for victory, for Pogtopia to defeat Manberg and for them to take back what was rightfully theirs. Wilbur refused, however, with harsh, self-deprecating laughter. "You know I don't deserve it."

And yet, when Quackity fell asleep, Wilbur twisted an aureate primary between his fingers.

"I wish my dad would come back," he mumbled, with tears in his eyes. "Please."

The next day, the Angel of Death returned.

The next day, Wilbur Soot died on his own father's blade.

Quackity wouldn't find out that it was a wish and a feather that had brought Philza to L'Manberg until later, until after Schlatt's funeral and after Tubbo became president of a crater. He wouldn't find out that Wilbur's third and final life had been taken by the will of Lady Luck, by Quackity's indirect hand.

Quackity drowned his suffering in alcohol that night. He only made it home because a fire demon and a man with kaleidoscopes in his eyes found him, and offered him a place to stay.

Things got… better, after that.

Quackity grew strong, in his new role on Tubbo's cabinet. He grew stronger, bolder, *vengeful*, and swore he'd set right the damage his wishes had caused. His wings, under Karl and Sapnap's tender hands, became strong again, feathers growing back, muscles strengthening, and when the Butcher Army set out to bring Technoblade to justice, Quackity finally took flight.

Maybe it was his blessing that let them gain the upper hand, maybe it was something else, but Technoblade froze when Quackity held his axe against the throat of the half-Piglin's prized horse, wings spread and haloing him in the gold of reflected sunlight.

Maybe it was Quackity's brash confidence that made him forget to search Techno's trousers for a Totem of Undying before the execution.

"You think you can beat me?" Quackity taunted, swinging his axe and moving with the deadly grace of a cobra, golden wings flashing in the torchlight of the tunnel as he and Techno dueled. "You really think you're gonna be able to kill me in that shit armor? And with a fuckin' pickaxe?"

"Oh I'll kill you, alright," Techno sneered, dodging his swing, and the sounds of Netherite clashing on steel echoed in the hall as the hooked head of his pick caught the blade of Quackity's axe, yanking him off-balance and knocking the weapon from his hands.

"*I HAVE A PICKAXE, AND I'LL PUT IT THROUGH YOUR TEETH!*"

Quackity woke in the bed he shared with Karl and Sapnap, wheezing and choking as blood poured from the gash in his face, his vision blurring red and it felt like his face was on fire and the *pain*—

—Death marks don't heal. The scar Techno's pickaxe left on his face and his milky, useless left eye was a glaring reminder of yet another fuck-up, of his *failure*.

Quackity grew colder. He grew harder, and more alone.

He told himself he didn't care when Doomsday left L'Manberg in ruins for the third and final time. He told himself he didn't care when fire rained from the sky and the land where the nation once stood was reduced to a crater all the way down to bedrock, and he told himself it didn't matter. He was tentative and anxious when Sapnap proposed to him and Karl, and the engagement rings on his fingers felt like lead rather than the finest Nether gold.

"*Is it me that you love?*" He'd finally asked them that night, "*or my wings?*"

His wings had grown since he'd fallen for them. His feathers were full now, and he'd learned how to truly fly. Sapnap said he looked like an angel, and Karl often gazed at him with wonder in his eyes. He'd given them both charms with one of his molted primaries on each, tokens of his love, and Quackity couldn't help wondering if it was him they desired, or merely his blessing like so many others before them.

"*Are you kidding?*" Sapnap had chuckled, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "*I couldn't care less about your wings. All I care about is the man who bears them.*"

"*You're our lucky duck,*" Karl had added, his smile brilliant, kaleidoscope eyes shimmering with dizzying fractals of green and gold. "*We love you, Quackity.*"

"Did they?" Dream taunted between agonized gasps, slumped on the floor of his cell in a pool of blood. "Or did they just tell you that?"

"Shut up," Quackity snarled, blinking back tears, grip tightening on the handle of his axe. "I'm the one with the axe, you piece of shit. Now tell me what's in that damn book, or I'm gonna slit your fucking throat with it."

Did they love me?

Probably not, Quackity thought to himself later that evening as he rinsed Dream's blood from his hands, gazing miserably at his scarred face in the mirror, his golden wings, the matching gold fangs that replaced the teeth knocked out by Techno's pickaxe. *They got what they wanted. They took the feather charms you made them, and left.*

No one will love you for anything but your wings.

That was what Quackity thought, before Las Nevadas, before he discovered Slime.

At first he was annoyed, and mildly infuriated by the creature's crude attempt at acting human. Something about Slime's naïveté and childlike nature drove him crazy; Quackity hated the creature's undying cheerfulness and optimism. Maybe it was the fact that Slime reminded him of himself before everything he'd suffered, or something else, but he could hardly stand Slime's wide grin and chipper attitude.

"You are so fucking weird," Quackity grumbled one day, watching from his desk as a puddle of green goop oozed under the door of his office and reformed in front of him.

"Yep! I'm a human guy!" Slime announced cheerfully, dashing over to kiss him on the cheek.

Quackity barely managed to stifle a chuckle.

He hated to admit it, but Slime grew on him. He was a good kid—still a little weird, and now and again he'd say something rather ominous, like that whole *I've watched countless civilizations rise and fall* bit—and he worked hard, always did what he was told, and his cheerfulness was admittedly rather contagious. Quackity tried not to, he really did, but offering Slime a place in Las Nevadas quickly turned from an attempt to manipulate the creature's innocence into something much, much purer.

Despite being an ancient being made of primordial cave goop, Quackity found himself starting to care for Slime like a son.

Slime didn't care about his wings (well, maybe a little, he was very fond of shiny things and Quackity's feathers were no exception). Slime loved Quackity like a father, and did so unconditionally.

When Technoblade escaped the prison and Dream seemingly did as well, Slime was the first thing that came to Quackity's mind.

Please be okay, Quackity prayed silently, clutching Ossium's reins in a death grip as they galloped at full tilt back to Las Nevadas. Despite the disastrous consequences he'd endured because of it, he broke the one rule he knew his blessing had, and recklessly, *selfishly*, tried to use his gift for himself.

I wish for my son to be okay.

Slime was okay. Slime was waiting for him with Purpled, wide-eyed and asking what the alarms shrieking throughout Las Nevadas meant.

And then the ground collapsed from under their feet.

"Give me the fucking Revive Book," Purpled snarled as they stood on the platform. "Give me the book or I'll kill you for it."

"Oh, shut the hell up!" Quackity spat, and his wings flared behind him with rage, catching the light of the lava below and haloing him in brilliant orange-golden light. "I can't believe we're in so much fucking danger and all you can think about is yourself! Even if I *did* have the book, you really think I'd just give it to you, you little shit?"

There was darkness in Purpled's eyes.

"Fine," the boy replied, his voice icy-calm. "Have it your way."

His sword swung.

Slime lurched, screaming and backpedaling frantically, his goopy arm severed at the elbow.

It would've grown back.

It would've grown back, had the boy not stumbled over the edge.

"*SLIME!*"

Quackity leapt into the lava before he realized what was happening. The enchantments on his armor barely held back the blistering heat as he landed in the bubbling, thigh-deep cauldron, frantically struggling over to where Slime's body was bubbling and melting, right next to a pile of sand and stone that'd fallen in from the road above.

"SLIME!" Quackity screamed as he climbed onto the makeshift platform, reaching for his son, and he panicked when Slime's goop broke apart, boiling and disintegrating in his hands. "GET IN THE SAND! GET IN THE FUCKING SAND!"

There was terror in Slime's eyes as he struggle to hold his form, to move, to stay solid enough to take his hand.

It was too late.

The terror in Slime's eyes became acceptance, and his face was sagging and dripping as it began to melt.

"Thank you for showing me what it means to be human," he said, his mouth stretching into an anguished smile as his body melted away into sludge. "Maybe I almost was."

And then there was nothing left.

And Quackity screamed.

He was numbly aware, numbly aware of the blistering heat of the lava overpowering his armor's enchantments and scorching his exposed skin, but he couldn't find it in himself to move or care.

He stayed, kneeling on the sand as it began to sink into the lava, sobbing.

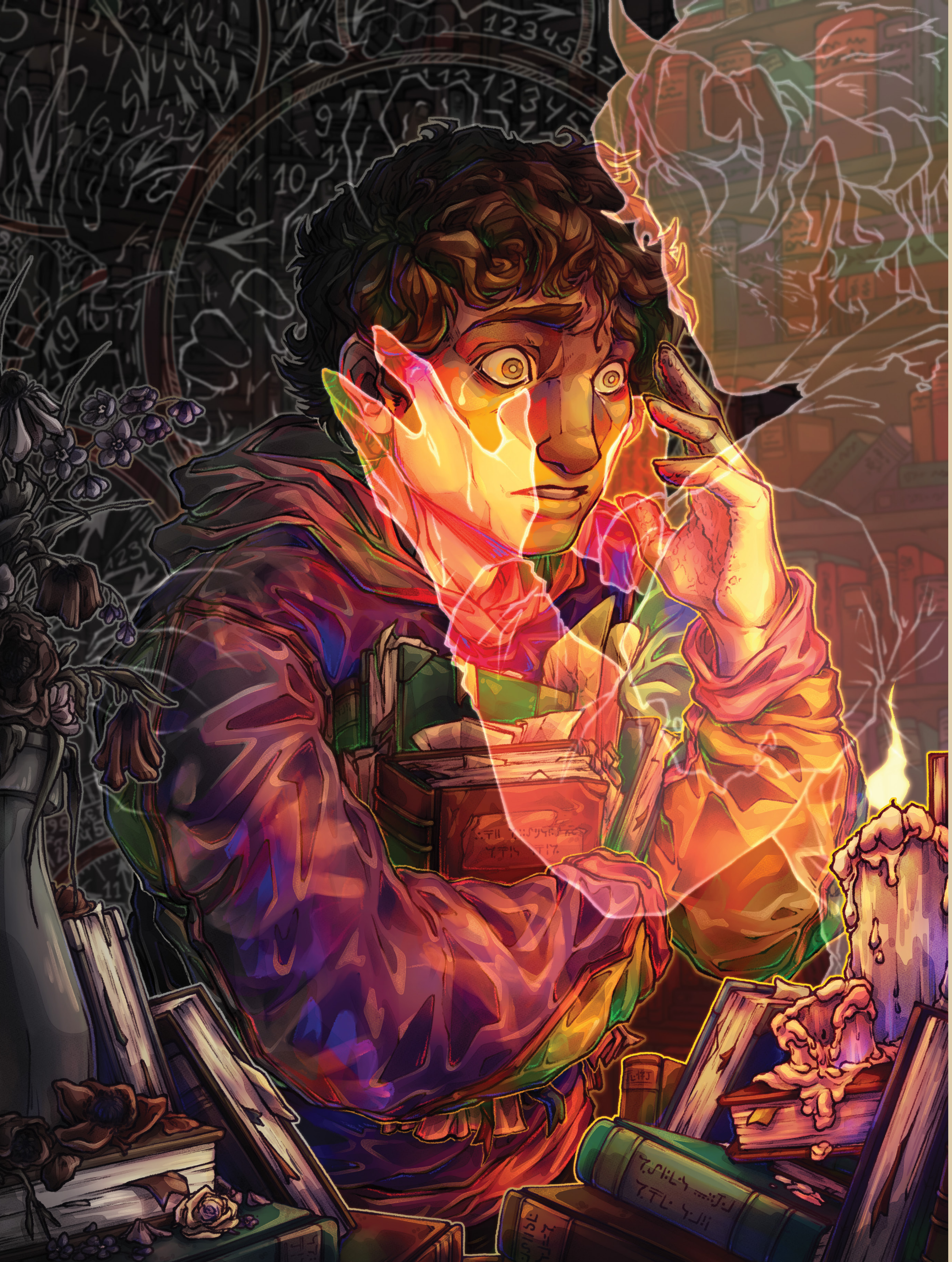
He sobbed and screamed until his throat was hoarse, until he was knee-deep in lava and he could smell boiling metal and burning flesh.

Quackity's wings were burning.

Aureate feathers caught alight like tinder. They smoldered and blackened, curling as they turned to ash, and the gold dust that clung to them began to melt. The liquid gold ran down his back in glowing rivers, scorching his already blistered skin and leaving undulating trails of scar tissue in their wake.

It was beautiful in a poetic, agonizing way, Quackity thought. Beautiful as Icarus's fall from the heavens, in a shower of glittering feathers and molten wax.

Fitting. He'd flown much too close to the sun.



Slowly Forgetting, A Silent Dreamer

THERE IS A tale, a tale as old as time themself, of a dreamer. But not just any dreamer. One whose dreams came to life with just a breath of fate, one whose dreams become memories of stories he'd seen aeons ago. A man that legends speak of to be a prophet of some sorts, or something seemingly otherworldly.

People say he was once a Watcher, one of the Inbetween, before he was cast away for his callousness in an Overworld. They say that he argued with Time themself, arguing for his position as one of his own. For whatever reason he was cast away, no one knows. Mayhaps he trespassed in lands he wasn't meant to touch. Mayhaps he changed time, for everyone knows if you change time, you change space itself. Who knows?

But regardless of the reason, he was cast away, only left with locked memories, the form of a human and a touch of immortality. A gift for the mundane, they'd say. *Mundane*, the Watchers would whisper. In distaste, that is. Tossed away to an Overworld, it was there he learnt how to live. How to add colours to his blank canvas, to talk and touch in ways that he could've never thought of with his fellow Watchers.

He *lived*. For the first time in decades, centuries, millennia, he *lived*. Before, he was mottled white and grey, boring and tired. But now? Now he was heliotrope purple, he was tantalising turquoise, he was a bright orange, swirling and mixing. He was neon pink with love, he was carmines with anger, he was muted blues with sadness.

All these colours that hid within him earlier *pulsed*. They jumped out of him, and he grasped them, acknowledged them. In this mismatched world, he *belonged*. All the time, he felt like he was never meant to be of alabaster white, of dreary grey. He was an anomaly, an erratic heartbeat amongst the steady.

He revelled in all that was new, and it was then that he was able to smile and to laugh and to belong.

But everyone knows that all things good never last long.

No one knows why or even how it started, but it just... happened, or so the stories say. It had been years, decades, millennia.

It was just a day, like any other, and like at the end of all days, personages will have the tendency to... sleep. Of course, this doesn't apply to all mortals.

Sleep corralled Karl, pulling him in with whispered reassurements. And because this day was just like the others, he fell into the spider's illusion.

Unlike all the other times, he knew he was sleeping, and that was what stuck out to him. He knew that he wasn't back *there*, confined and caged like a bird. He knew that he was still colours, and not *boring*, or *monotone* or just- just *mundane*.

A castle of shining quartz stared him down, tall and pure. Gainsboro grey and floral white paint a pretty scene, all elegant and regal, just like Time. But of course, all roses have their thorns. There are too many terrors, too much pain and aching and *longing* to exist in such a magnificent place. And the *scathing* and *scorn* that Karl had felt after becoming mortal. Mocking chuckles, the stare of disappointment (for whatever reason Karl does not know... or mayhaps he does).

It was all strict, boring, mundane schedules. All sitting and waiting and *observing*, and watching horrible, horrible events unfold without having the ability to do anything. It was all futile, and *cruel*. *That's the way of life,* they'd all say. *Not everyone can be saved,* they'd chide.

And that was just the Watchers.

The *gods*, Karl would say in a tone of demise, they were worse. The *worst*. They laughed and played with fickle lives, they'd play for wars, create stupid, *stupid* problems. Problems that could've been easily solved by themselves, but they wouldn't, because *that's just the way of life.*

The life the gods would choose.

He always thought the Inbetween to be something... pure. Kind and forgiving, in a way.

How he was wrong.

But we're straying from the story of a dreamer.

The immortal stands, staring and in shock. He was not meant to be back, and he was never meant to be back there ever again. So why now out of all times? Why, why, why?

His heart yearned for answers he would probably never get. He took a deep breath again.

In.

Karl took a step forward.

Out.

His body jolted from underneath him. *No. No. Not again please. Nonononono-*

(Again?)

(Yes. Again.)

He shut his eyes tightly because oh Prime, what will he have to see? What horrors, what pain will he have to see again? What will he have to watch? His heart rocked, jumped, stuttered. His hands shook and jittered.

Why did he fear this world, figmented in his mind? Players will ask.

Well, Karl has good, good reason to be truly scared of this world, and perhaps in the future, his own mind. Let's go to the first time he had to watch. He stood amongst the dead, while he was stained in mulberry reds and stark scarlet. His heart ached dark blue, fluttering gruesome green.

Fear.

Always fear, when jumping through times. It's never happiness, never joy, never the feeling of relief.

That fear stuck with him now. Stuck with him to the soles of his feet, ever so wavering, as his world shifted in tandem. Until it stopped. And before him lay a familiar scene, one where he hoped he'd never have to see again.

Before him lay a majestic city, shining in all its glory. Like all cities Karl knew, it was large, and utterly beautiful, but lonely. This city was long abandoned by the people, who fled when an illness ravaged the land. An illness caused by the people. It was a city of learnt betrayal, of murder and of pain. He remembered this place, though he swore that he'd forgotten. He never wanted to be a witness to the tragedy of those times.

His friends, his poor, poor friends, he watched, as they fell (*he fell*) for a trap so painfully, agonisingly obvious. He wanted to stop them, tell them that *they were going the wrong way, don't follow the being in green and red,* but he could not. All he could do was watch.

And wait.

It continued, for hours, days, months it would seem to be. Endless torture, and endless pain. Flashes of red staining a pristine mask, and a silver smirk on face so seemingly innocent. Waving hands, and eyes filled with horror upon being locked behind iron doors.

All he wanted to do was to explore. To learn and to help.

But alas, that was never meant to be.

And with the image of a smiling man bearing down on him, he woke, panting and eyes wide. He pressed a hand (hand? What's a hand?) to his chest and he sighed upon seeing familiar colours. His heart began to slow down, and he felt his hands begin to steady. He raised his eyes to the scene around him. He took in red journals, purple pens and papers dishevelled on his desk (since when did he have a desk?). In his hand, he clasped a feather.

(He was holding a hand when he slept, wasn't he?)

He lifted himself off the floor. His legs shook with the effort, and the first time he stood, he fell. But eventually, he got the hang of moving again.

He wandered his library, trailing hands along the dusty shelves. They were never this dusty before. He tripped, once, and twice, over books that lay around. *Were there ever this many before?* He asked into the high ceiling.

He tiptoed to the walls, bricked wallpaper peeling and cracks breaking themselves into the wall. He pried open stiff windowsills, and took a breath of fresh air, only to be greeted with a sickly sweet smell. He frowned, finding his white poppies drooped and crying.

(Didn't he water them? He was here yesterday, he swears by it. And he---)

He wrote himself a note (*don't forget to water the flowers! :]*) and he patted his clothing down, before rolling up his sleeves. He took a deep breath in and surveyed the mess.

And he organised, replaced, restored his library, back to the way it was before.

Karl gently stacked books into their respective shelves, brushing delicate dust away. He trailed fingers along mahogany, trailed fingers across wilted petals and along dry soil. He walked around, stepped on a pen or two. He pried open stiff windows, and allowed fresh air to flood the stale room.

He breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

He reminded himself that he was not of the Inbetween any longer. He was of the world (which world?), and he was colour. He was not back there, worn down by the monotony. And he would never be back there.

That he was sure of.

* * *

It's been a few days. A few days since it happened last, but there's no point for him to dwell on it. It was just a bad dream after all. Everyone gets them from time to time.

Right?

And Karl knew that dreams and nightmares, no matter how scary, could not hurt him. It was just a figment of his imagination after all. It would never be real, no matter how realistic his dream could be.

Darlin'? Are you good?

Karl snapped his eyes up to meet smouldering brown. He smiled softly and ran his hands over tanned fingers and worn callouses.

I'm okay. Just tired.

His fiance frowned. *Have you not been sleeping?*

I have, Karl protested. *Things just on my mind, s'all.*

Then rest. Karl was pulled into a warm lap, and fingers carded through his hair. Karl struggled to keep his eyes open, ever so heavy with calmness, and the feeling of safety. When did he feel so tired? A timbre voice began to hum a soft tune, and Karl drifted further, and further. The warmth enveloped him, and finally, he rested.

He was back there again. Although instead of standing outside, admiring in fear, he now stood along a bleached hallway. A doorway inched at his right, and he peeked in.

Ever so hesitant, he walked in. And although the place was empty, it held a stifling weight, like everyone and everything had been in that room all at the same time. He paused, ever so unsure, but it couldn't be that bad, could it?

But before he could enter, the world shifted underneath him.

* * *

Once again, Karl was a Watcher.

He never wanted to be back here. It reminded him of times that hurt, and times when he thought that he couldn't do anything to save someone that he loved deeply. Still loved deeply. And it didn't help when he fell in love, with a boy he barely knew, and he changed the world for him.

For some reason, Karl loved this boy, this foolish boy who decided to venture into places that were not made for mortals, who decided that life was too mundane in his home. Just like Karl, except this boy had the guts to leave.

Maybe this was why Karl loved him so much.

And now, with sudden realisation, Karl *loved* this boy, despite barely knowing him. Karl loved him, and now he was scared to lose this love, this love that he never knew existed in the first place. And it was then when he realised that maybe he wasn't really cut out for the Inbetween. Cut out to be monotony and dark grey.

But before he can dwell further, before he can *fall* for a stupid boy further, a scream ripped through the air.

No.

The boy fell. He fell, tumbling and turning, until he fell into mortality. He fell into burning fire and etching stone, and Karl cried out to him. But the boy does not hear him, for Karl is only a Watcher. He was only ever meant to watch, to watch people *suffer*.

But this time, he cannot only watch.

So, as the boy burned in flames, with trembling hands, Karl rebirthed him from the flames. He hissed, a burning rod scathing him. Marking him for life to come. He recreated life, just because he was too scared to lose it all. But with life comes consequences, and those consequences were not kind, especially when altering the course of nature.

Never interfere, for everything happens for a reason.

But it was too late. And all Karl remembered is a small child, crying, weeping, with burning flame running through his veins.

Karl woke with a soft gasp, tears tracking down. A candle burnt softly, casting wavering shadows along bursting bookshelves. (Were they ever that full in the first place?) His journals were seemingly stacked high, and there were spilled ink pots, slowly staining rumpled pages.

He rose, and his mind screamed at him for a memory he could not recall. He placed a hand on his pounding head. Why- why had that evoked such emotion? Why did that seemed so familiar? Why was *everything* so familiar?

So many questions.

So little answers.

The dreams were happening more frequently. (Or maybe Time just escaped him.) And each time, Karl woke in a place he swore he wasn't in before.

This time, Karl swore he didn't sleep. Or he truly didn't mean to. Because he was just in his garden, drawing the mushrooms and the trees, and next, he was in a small cottage, a feathered man leaning on his shoulder. Roses surrounded the two, and Karl admired the scene, and the man beside him .

It felt like home.

Mi tesoro, the man said fondly. Karl smiled.

Karl whispered his name, and a dazzling smile greeted him, admiral blue glowing brightly. He lightly ran his fingers through golden feathers, and the man in front of him sighed, content. And when the man in front of him was content, Karl felt that he must be too.

My lucky duck, he cooed, and a soft chirp was given in reply.

He still was carding his fingers through feathers, when gold turned to carmine. It coated his hands, and ran up his arms, until it pooled at his chest, where a silver cracked axe stuck. His vision began to blur, and all he saw was puffed golden feathers, and a sad smile.

Lo siento, mi amor, the man mouthed.

And everything went black once again.

Karl's heart ached, more than usual. His pen stopped on an already filled page, and he pulled out another sheet, casting already full pages to the side. His colour His mind cried at him to stop and *remember* the one thing he forgot. He brought the pen back to paper.

Sapnap.

George.

Tina.

There was a name. Who? Who was he forgetting? No. He was not forgetting. He remembered everything. But there was something.

But there was a name.

It screamed at him, screamed at him to remember something, someone. But he just couldn't put his finger on it. What was it?

Who was it?

Who was the man with golden feathers, with a grin that could light up the world? Who was the man who was warm, who called him a treasure worth finding? Who was the man with no name?

But no matter how hard he tried to think, he couldn't remember a name. Karl's focus waned, and his mind refused to go further.

Mayhaps he was just imagining it all. It never made sense anyway. How could he have *two* people he loved like *that*? He scoffed into empty air. It just didn't make sense. It'd never make sense anyway. He pulled away from a growing train of thought.

He picked one of his ever-growing collection of journals, and frowned. Since when had this one been filled? He only bought this one yesterday, and it should've been empty. The pages were yellowish and dog ears decorated the edges. Ink blots were stamped darkly, and frantic writing scribbled all over each page, writing barely readable.

He shook his head. He'd just have to buy more journals next time. He strayed to the window, where the sun was setting. Golden light casted over the grassy fields, and flowers smiled at him. The buildings looked taller, much older, the bricks fading to a dull red. He would have to ask his fiance to replace them.

He breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

And he turned away, once again to clear the mess that he himself made.

White halls and grey stairs hailed his return. Concrete swirled underneath his feet as he climbed a silent ascent. He was not supposed to be here any longer. He was not supposed to be of this land. He was not meant to be back. But for some reason, he was called, and no one could resist the call.

He stepped in, finding no one. Why did you call me?

A black rose was the given answer. But before he could reach out to hold, xanthous orange enveloped him.

And brought him to admiral blue with glistening gold, sweetened with a large beaming smile. He was brought to sweet, sweet nectar and golden skin, and loud, fiendish laughter, paired with alabaster white swirled with warm coals. Warm arms have wrapped around his person and he felt safe. He drew back and they both smiled warmly. How nice. But then bubbly pink turned to onyx black.

The air was poisoned with hands of malicious yellow.

Smiles were no longer, and instead they were screaming. Screaming at each other, and so he screamed back, and then he tasted carmine red and bitter green, and he threw back gritty vantablack until he huffed and puffed.

It was silent, and he was alone (and still was alone), standing with empty arms. Ice blue engulfed his person, and his eyes ached, puffy and red. They dropped, lower and lower, and it was then he woke, shaking with tears threatening to fall. His heart ached and his hands felt so empty.

It felt wrong.

Prime, why did it feel so wrong?

Why did his heart feel like it was going to rip out his chest at any moment? Why were his eyes leaking? Why did his brain tell him that he just lost something? Why, oh why? Oh *Prime*.

His breathing became erratic, and before he knew it, he startled awake, knocking several journals to the ground. Pens clattered and his desk shuddered. The candle tipped wax onto crumpled sheets. He stood up abruptly, shifting everything further. The ground swayed beneath his feet. He pressed a hand to his head.

His mind was fogged up with the past that Karl swore didn't happen. That dream… it wasn't right. He only had one fiance, only one love, only one person that was deserving of his devotion. He had not lost anything, and nothing was familiar about that dream. And it would not be.

He was sure of it.

* * *

All of this continued for years, decades, millennia. With each and every throw into time, he forgot more and more, and he noticed, despite forgetting so much, that he remembered how to dream. How to feel and how to touch, and he remembered how to imagine a world that he thought would be impossible.

Each dream seemed more abstract than the other, yet it somehow held *familiarity* with a feeling something akin to *love* and *home* and *comfort*. But it was impossible, he thought, for it was just a dream, something out of the figment of his imagination.

With due Time, Karl spiralled further into his mind, being unable to contain such information from its owner anymore. Each memory began to unearth itself in the most painful way it could, but the memories knew that they could not reveal themselves so easily.

Time beckoned him into their arms, pulled and tugged and cracked at his composure, his mind. They tossed him back and forth, bringing him back to places where he wanted to go back to. Each time, they left him in pieces, and each time they came back, just to taunt him.

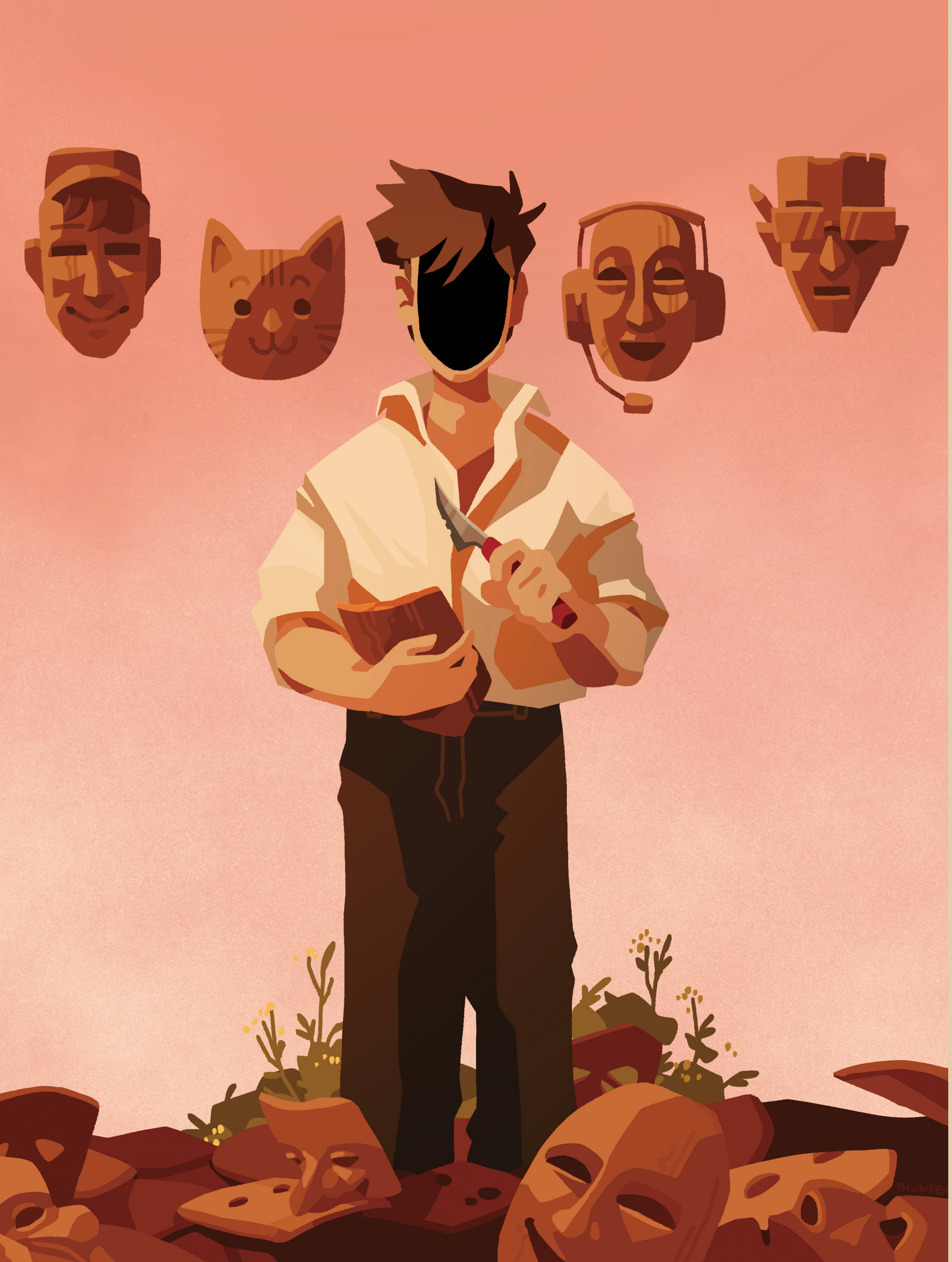
And after it all, they deposited him in a place where he thought to call home.

But the mind can only tolerate it for so long.

It was this time, after sitting in his library, that Karl began to truly question it all. He glanced around, to see what were empty shelves bursting at the seams, to see the rubbish bin stocked high, to see empty ink bottles laying around precariously. He saw dead flowers when they were bright and blooming, and he saw grey when there was meant to be colour. And shadows were cast eerily across it all, before a sharp gust of wind blew the candle out.

And it was then that he remembered, coloured by alabaster white and dreary grey.

And he cried.



Masking Price

HBOMB WAS A man old enough to finally know what he wanted to be when he grew up.

That statement was confusing to a lot of people when he told them, but he knew what it meant. He was old enough to fully appreciate the “childish” virtues of mischief, of joy, and of kindness without the expectation of reciprocity. Hbomb wanted to spread those values everywhere he went, and keep people happy - because if you forgot what it was like to be happy, it would be very hard to remember how to get there again.

Now, the closest thing to an occupation that Hbomb had was a traveling salesman. Except instead of selling things, he sold experiences. Games, challenges, contests, wisdoms - rarely could you hold what Hbomb offered, but you would hold it dear long after.

He traveled the many worlds, bringing a great big smile with him and leaving many more smiles behind him. He especially enjoyed joining tournaments of skill and power, and being a constant reminder to everyone that winning was rarely as important as enjoying yourself; memories made didn’t rust like medals did.

Hbomb was invited to a marvelous event - an election in a new land! The first election it had ever had, in fact; it was the baby steps of a new society. And Hbomb took the invitation, and the few belongings he could truly call his, and made his way into the land and towards the stage where the results would be called out. He hadn’t been able to vote, of course, because he just got here, but it would still be a nice opportunity to meet everyone during the celebrations!

It was a lively affair - one of the vice presidential nominees was apparently at home and asleep, two of the parties became one at what seemed like the very last second, and a distant god paid a citizen to stab him on the tour. Good times!

And then the winner immediately threw his political rivals out of the country they had apparently shed heartblood to create, and Hbomb decided he would go live in a tower of the castle outside of the country over there instead.

Hbomb, who had seen a lot of worlds in his day, got the pulse of this new world quickly.

People were quick to anger, slow to trust, and preferred doing things to thinking about them. This was a pattern often seen in worlds full of young people, like this one. It was also a recipe that often led to people becoming sad, and that had borne out here.

The president did not care about the welfare of his people, and the king did not have the power to take care of them. Even the people that wanted to band together often chose to fend for themselves, as it was the only guarantee they had of something like safety. People liked to be safe before they let themselves think about trying to be happy.

Well, if Hbomb was going to be staying here for any length of time, it wouldn't do to let everyone just be sad. And he was pretty sure he was staying, after two nice men who were past their own folliful youths had offered to sell him a house next to theirs in Boomerville. In case the king ever wanted him out of the tower.

Hbomb thought about what he could do to help. He knew that just offering help to people would get him pushed away. No one likes to admit that they need help.

But they did need to feel better. To think about something other than how bad things were getting for a little while.

He took long walks to think about what he could do. On one of those walks, Hbomb almost wandered into a small, practically untouched lake. The flowers were bright, the water was clear, and the hills hid the outside world from view.

Hbomb looked at the flowers, and he had an idea.

L'Cast was a simple enough idea. It was a way to get to know the people of the server that he didn't know, and to give people something to think about that was fun.

Especially when he added prizes. Hbomb had enough to give, and a little bit of greed could get people to come on the show, when they might have otherwise thought it pointless.

And Hbomb did not have a fancy setup, but he knew a simple kind of magic. He made special dyes, and painted a piece of thin wood with a special varnish, and poked holes for his eyes and mouth. He made a mask.

Hbomb's magic was not one of deception, only of costuming. The masks he could make would never fool people into thinking he was someone other than himself. But they could make him look like almost anything he wanted, if he could paint it. Terrible for a liar - perfect for an entertainer.

The first mask Hbomb made was a simple one, and one he had made before - a mask of his own face. It was washed and groomed, layered with tasteful touches of television makeup. Curving over the immaculate beard was a plain headset microphone, connected to just the beginnings of an earpiece.

When Hbomb put on the mask and looked in the mirror, he saw Host Hbomb staring back at him. The mask had made not only his face shift, but his clothing as well; a neatened collar, hiding the thin wire of a power pack. Clean, professional, and ready for interviewing, with no hint of the mask itself. A simple but highly practical magic.

The lake with the flowers became the perfect place for his plan.

L'Cast was an easy show to make - get two people into boats, roll the cameras, and talk. Surrounded by the beautiful view and distracted by the questions, the people of the server didn't have to think about anything but themselves. And people liked thinking, and talking, about themselves.

It was a lot better than thinking about the rest of the world for a bit.

With the success of L'Cast, Hbomb's brain began to work.

One distraction could only work for so long, and not everyone was a fan of the camera. But Hbomb had more ideas of how to make people happy.

And he made more masks.

When boasts of physical prowess edged on turning to fights, and Hbomb could see the tension winding in fists, he made a referee mask. Sports stripes on the cheeks, a whistle on the lips, and a buzzed haircut. His games of skill turned boasters to competitors, releasing the tension with laughter.

When curiosity and boredom were turning to restlessness, and Hbomb could hear the thieves rustling in the tower, he made a scientist mask. Reflective and center-taped glasses, the tip of a pencil tucked into hair, and the lapels of a lab coat. His experiment of greed and generosity functioned both as a gift, and a test.

When King Eret called for knights to aid them, and Hbomb could feel the weight of the sword on his shoulders, he made a knight mask. A raised and slitted visor, war paint around the eyes, and a tasteful scar through the eyebrow. His jester's agility could be turned to the stopping of bloodshed if it were absolutely necessary.

When winter was cold and barren, and Hbomb could taste the bitterness rising in the air, he made a Santa mask. A fluffy white beard, rosy red blush on nose and cheeks, and the white lining of a red hat.

Neither last nor least, but certainly most iconic, was one more mask. Proof of why you must be careful what you wish for.

Two soft pink bow clips poking out from the sides. Large painted eyes, framed in luscious eyeliner and shimmering with inhuman levels of sparkle. Thick layers of bright pink blush, cut through by thin, straight whiskers. Grey-and-white stripes flowing from cheek into hair.

The mask that could strike fear and joy with a single look, and flicker of the tail.

He called it the catmaid.

The catmaid work was a bit of harmless fun, and in that it was very important, because it was harmless. On all sides.

When Hbomb wore the cat mask, he expected people to groan and yell and bat him away when he got too close for comfort. He expected people to curse him out, and draw weapons, and stare at him like he had two heads instead of an unsettlingly realistic tail. He expected people to scream at him when he messed up the simplest of tasks.

He didn't just expect all this. He *wanted* it. He played up the annoyance and innuendo and uselessness as much as he could.

People on the server were tense. Even without knowing everything that was going on, Hbomb could feel it spooling up, winding like the spring on an alarm clock ready to go off at any moment.

So the catmaid mask, and all the other masks, were a valve. They were permission for people to let off all that building frustration onto them, onto the masks which weren't really Hbomb. They could take out all their anger and annoyance and pent-up pissed-off energy on the mask, instead of keeping it cooped up forever.

It was a safe time to be angry. And people always felt a little better after they could be angry for a while, when anywhere else that anger would've started a war or worse.

Even Fundy, the favorite victim, with all his looks deciding whether he was going to abandon Hbomb in the Nether or strangle him with his own tail, always looked a bit better after a visit from the catmaid. Even if he would never, ever, ever admit it.

Fundy was a favorite target because he had a lot of anger to let out. Hbomb felt like he was helping someone who needed it.

That was what the point of the mask was. The point of all the masks. To help people.

And Hbomb was, by all accounts, pretty good at helping people forget about their problems for a little bit.

The problem with being good at something is that people start to want you only for the thing you're good at. Especially if that thing is making them happy.

Things on the server got worse. Friends turned on friends, divides deepened. Harmless pranks were treated as high crimes.

Hbomb saw the path things would take. He had seen things before. He could see how they would end. He wanted to warn people.

But whenever anyone would see him, they would ask which mask he would wear today. What game he had planned, what mischief he would commit.

They did not wish to hear wisdom out of the mouth of one meant to bring them comfort.

And if he dared speak words that did not make them happy, the people grew upset. The world was already making them upset - Hbomb was supposed to be different. He was supposed to make them happy.

That was why he made all the masks, right? To give them a break from all the terrible things? Why would he do anything else?

Hbomb's words of truth, his prophecies, fell on ears that would not hear them. Not from him.

There was a day he was walking to his house in Boomerville, without any of his masks on him.

Jack Manifold bumped into him, looking surprised. “Oh, sorry there, mate, didn't realize they'd brought someone new into the area! I'm Jack Manifold, super important, nice to meet you.”

Hbomb was puzzled, until he realized that Jack didn't recognize him.

Not without the mask.

Hbomb realized that he was nothing more than a joke. His opinions didn't matter to anyone else.

He didn't matter. Only the masks did.

So when Niki set the L'mantree ablaze, and when they watched the world burn around them, Hbomb brought all his masks.

He threw them onto the pyre, one by one by one.

The magic popped and fizzled, and the paper went up, and the smell of burning fur joined the cacophony of senses.

Whatever the morning would bring, he would be no one's jester.

Doomsday solved nothing. There was only loss, and destruction, and people clinging so tightly to the memory of what was that they did not think about healing.

Even Dream, the mastermind, being thrown into prison did not solve things. In most versions of the story, people forgot that Hbomb was right there alongside the others Punz brought to stop him.

The note in his room in Eret's castle, that apologized to Eret for the stealing of Hbomb's things, was the final straw.

If Hbomb didn't matter to these people, then he would disappear. And no one would care, right?

He gave everything to Niki, made his way to a remote corner of the world, and planned to never see anyone again.

His wisdom, and his laughter, would go forever unheard.

Alone, Hbomb spiraled.

Hbomb broke all the mirrors. He didn't care how he looked, since no one would see his face anyways.

He hadn't thought about the joy that bringing joy to others had brought him in turn. He hadn't thought about isolation as a punishment for himself.

No one could visit, because no one knew where he was. Hbomb didn't think they would want to, but he gave them no choice, in the end.

The only thing that changed the ache in his heart was drink, which replaced it with an ache in the head.

One day, a storm raged outside the village. The rue overgrown in his garden ripped itself out by the roots, flung against his window like muffled drumbeats. Hbomb barred the door, still deep in a bottle of home-brewed beer.

A crash of thunder shook his thin house. He stumbled, and the bottle flung from his hand, smashing against the bookcase.

As Hbomb went to pick up the broken bottle, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the side, and nearly dropped it again.

He didn't have a reflection.

Or, more accurately, his face didn't have a reflection. Hbomb could still see his stiff neck, and his unkempt hair, and his filthy shirt.

But where his face was supposed to be, from his chin to his hairline, there was just... nothing. Just the bottle.

Hbomb gripped the bottle tight, hurrying to a window. It was as filthy as his shirt, caked with dust and rust from never being opened. Uncaring, he scrubbed at it with a sleeve, until just a sliver of glass was clear enough to see in.

Where his face was supposed to be now looked like the dead grass outside the window, whipping in the fierce winds.

A shaking hand reached up, feeling the space. Hbomb could feel his cracked lips as he moved them, and his nose as he breathed shakily through it, but his fingers collided with nothing where there should be something. In his reflection, his hand was reaching *into* the hole where his face should be.

Where his face wasn't, anymore.

If no one sees your face for too long, it starts to fade away. It knows when it isn't needed.

And a face, once forgotten to the world, can't be brought back.

After that day, Hbomb stopped drinking. He cleaned up the mess around his house. He shaved the unseeable bush his beard had become through touch.

Hbomb thought about it. Moving away from everyone was supposed to

make everything hurt less. It didn't.

He had still missed them, even if he thought they didn't miss him. And he had been so alone, his face had disappeared.

It was a long, long journey home. Hbomb kept the hood on his cape high so that no one could see that his face was missing.

If anyone was there to greet him at all. The place seemed...empty. It made him sad to see.

Even when everything was awful, there had always been activity around the heart of the server. Comings and goings.

Niki saw him on the street, and seemed shocked to see him, even though she did recognize him. They hugged, and Hbomb realized how long it had been since he'd touched anyone.

She looked at him, quizzical. "Why are you wearing a hood? I can't see your face."

"It's the start of a Badboyhalo cosplay," he said quickly, "to go around and swear at people. The hood is getting me used to being in darkness."

Covering her mouth, Niki snorted.

Hbomb struck a pose, hands on his hips, and did his best Badboyhalo impression. "Laughing at me? Now that's not nice of you, you fucking muffinhead!"

She burst out laughing, doubling over and clutching her sides. It was the laugh of someone who hadn't laughed in a very long time, and it dug itself into a hole in Hbomb's chest that he'd never realized was empty.

When she finally recovered, wiping tears from her eyes, Niki asked if Hbomb was going to be staying, or going back to the savannah.

Hbomb looked at the crater. He looked at his old home in Boomerville. He looked at Niki.

"I think it's time I came home. On an unrelated note, do you have any paint?"

With Niki's help, and a pang in his heart at her almost desperate willingness to be allowed to do so, Hbomb gathered all the things he needed to make new masks. He gathered the paints, and the wood, and the wisps of magic.

The first mask he made was a little different. It was a little thinner, and a little lighter, and took a lot longer to make.

From old photos, from memory, and from the fleeting vision of touch, Hbomb painted a mask of his own face. He knew it wouldn't be exactly perfect without being able to see it anymore, but if everyone else had forgotten it, then they probably wouldn't notice the difference.

Some part of him didn't want to make this mask. Some part of him, still bitter as whiskey, wanted to make them all face his missing face - what their refusal to listen to him had caused.

But Hbomb knew in his heart that voice was wrong. It was his own giving-up that cost him his face, and the people on the server had been through enough.

Whether that voice thought they deserve forgiveness or not, Hbomb would forgive them anyways.

Finally, the mask was finished. A big smile inside a well-trimmed beard, under a broad nose, between two mischievous blue eyes.

Hbomb carved the magic symbols into the corners, shaving down the smoothest curves he could. This mask, more so than any other mask he'd ever made, could not afford to slip.

He picked up the mask, taking the thick brown strings from all four corners, and tied them together behind his head. He shifted them, back and forth, until the knot was too tight to ever come loose, and until every inch of the thread was hidden under his hair.

Taking a deep breath, Hbomb turned, looking at the mirror he'd borrowed from the empty Boomerville. If he had messed it up, there was no going back now.

Hbomb saw half-kempt hair give way to pale skin. He saw a broad nose, between two wide blue eyes. He saw cracked lips inside a well-trimmed beard.

Lips that slowly, weakly, pulled themselves into one of the first smiles he'd made in a long, long time.

It would never be what it once was. When carving the broad nose, Hbomb's shaking hands had nicked his thumb, and a drop of blood had rolled its way into one of the symbols. The color would always be a little bit... off from how it used to be.

A face, once forgotten to the world, can't be brought back.

But it would be enough to see other people again, and not scare them away. And that was all he needed it to do, so he could help them.

The people he left were different than the people he returned to.

There were plenty of new faces, new friends, new participants in his jests and japes.

There were old friends, those who missed him in his isolation - and those who hadn't, but greeted him all the same.

But there were also many absences that Hbomb noticed. People who had been seen so little they were on the edge of being forgotten.

Vikkstar and Lazarbeam had let dust settle over every inch of Boomerville.

The only signs of Jack Manifold were the bottles occasionally flying from the hotel windows.

If anyone could say where Fundy had gone, they weren't doing so.

For each missing member, each long-lost friend, Hbomb made a special mask. They were difficult to carve; there is a precision required in preservation. He himself had been gone so long that the details were fuzzy in his mind, but he spent his nights poring over old pictures. Trying to remember the nicks in a gumdrop, the curve of whiskers, the frayed headset wires.

Hbomb made a mask of each person who was not seen. Each night, after the tricks and treats of the day were done, he would put on the masks of the missing, and stare into the mirror for a few minutes. It was not the same as their real face, but it might be enough to stop their faces from being completely forgotten.

From their faces turning to void, as Hbomb had done.

He could not save himself. But maybe, he could save them.

As Hbomb returned to his work, he found a new purpose for his skills, and made new masks. There were old favorites, like the referee. There were new joys, like totally famous ukulele player Johnny Cantteen.

And then there were the Lenders.

These were simpler, mostly blank and unfeatured besides the holes for eyes and mouth. The only additions were those of a role - the hair net of a fast food worker, the pointed ears of a cat.

These new masks were not meant for Hbomb to wear. They were meant for him to lend. Other people could wear these masks, and though the magic was a little more faulty, anyone could become the subject of the mask.

Hbomb had struggled to hold onto himself, yet many others had found them far too much in their own heads. A day with a mask was an excuse to let go of the weight of who they were for a little bit. To put down the sins crawling up their back, and lose themself in being someone else.

They weren’t people who hurt others. They weren’t people who were hurt. They weren’t people in danger.

They were the mask, for a while.

The catmaid was a particular favorite - easy to lose oneself in comedy and innuendo, and to have remnants of a less fraught relationship with those around them. Or, well, differently fraught.

Hbomb did not miss the irony, nor the pain, in Antfrost wearing that mask more than once. (Even if it became just a maid outfit for the giant cat.) Nor did he miss the looks passed between Antfrost and Foolish - he may not know what had transpired between them, but the mask offered something like a second chance where it was needed.

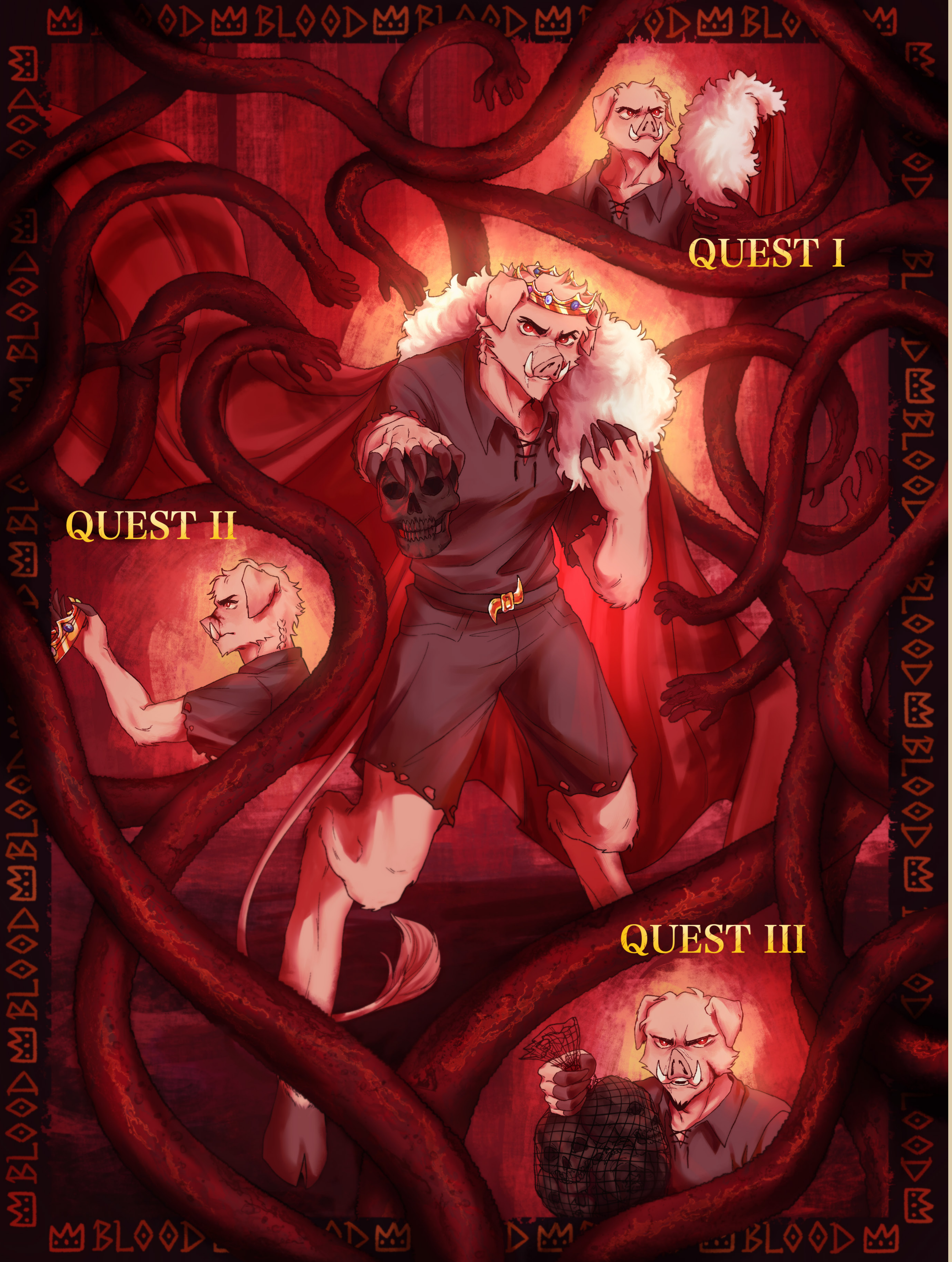
And so Hbomb spent his days, returned to the heart of the Dream SMP. While other worlds would call him away for some time, Hbomb would always find his way back, knowing that he was not only needed - he was wanted.

A good thing to be.

They say he is still there, to this very day. Watching for those who need a smile, or a break, or a chance to vent. Carving new masks as he needs them, all hiding the one he can never take off.

And it doesn’t matter that no one can see it - or that no one, not even he, will ever see it again.

He always wears his mask with a smile.



The Quests of the Blood God

THIS IS THE story of the Blood God. This is during the days when Technoblade was not yet the Blood God, but simply a young warrior, his tusks barely grown. In those days, the Nether was a dangerous place-- but you know that. It is, of course, still a dangerous place.

The tribe of piglins Technoblade belonged to lived in what remained of their bastion. Those were hard days in the Nether, when kings hoarded resources into their bastions, leaving weaker tribes to fend for themselves, always trying to take more territory and gold. When strong, experienced warriors of the tribe died in battle or were bribed to the enemy's side, the tribe began to wither, without warriors to hunt for food or protect the hunting land.

When there was truly no hope left, Technoblade took all he had-- his golden earrings and shield and iron axe- and traveled to the throne of the blood god.

The Blood God lived, in those days, in an empty bastion where they watched the cycles of blood and war, death and life. The Overworlders think that the Blood God is the God of Death, but we know this isn't so. Blood is not life or death, but both. And so, the Blood God watched all. But none would dare approach, except these: the desperate, the foolhardy and the heroes who were both.

So Technoblade came to the throne of the blood god.

"Give me," he said, "a piece of your power."

He did not kneel. He was desperate, foolhardy, and a hero, and to boot he was also brave.

The blood god bent closer, a thousand eyes watching, a thousand hands reaching out. Their curiosity was piqued, and Technoblade knew it.

Foolhardy child, the blood god said. *Stupid hero.* Their voice buzzed and hummed with a thousand voices fighting for tongue. Only the most united could be heard, but the undercurrent was overwhelming. *You do not know what you are asking for.*

"My people are dyin'," Technoblade argued, even though he trembled under the weight of their horrible gaze. "They need someone strong enough to protect them. Our warriors are gone, and I am not enough to save them. Give me your power and I will drive our enemies away."

The blood god smiled; or at least it showed him all their teeth. *Then child,* they said, *we will give you a quest. If you succeed, we will grant your request.*

"What is the quest?"

The blood god loomed. *Bring me a cloak red as blood and soft as nylium.*

"Red as blood?" Technoblade said, "Really original." But he went and felt all the Blood God's eyes follow him.

* * *

He walked through the Nether, searching for a red cloak, but found no such thing. For three days, he pushed his way through heavy jungles of red stems, hanging vines caressing his shoulders as he walked past like heavy hands. On the third day he finally broke through the edge of the forest, and found himself at the beginning of the long dry wastes. There was nothing there except the silent curve of the netherrack along one side of the barren plane, and the crackling of a lava lake somewhere below.

And in the midst of the desolation was a lone traveler. Technoblade could see they were a Trader: one of those piglins who traveled to the nether portals and offered their goods to travelers from the Overworld in exchange for gold. Potions, pearls, magma cream or quartz dust-- all the riches and lovely things the Nether has to offer.

The Trader carried with them satchels and potions and great heavy bags of their goods. And slung over one shoulder, was a great soft cloak as red as blood.

Technoblade saw that the Blood God had not led him astray. But how to get his hands on the cloak? Clearly it was from the Overworld-- nothing in the Nether produced cloth so soft. If so, it must be valuable indeed and Technoblade had no gold to trade with.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He took off his golden earrings, his one birthright from his Bastion, and approached the Trader.

"Hello traveler," he said, "well met!"

"Well met," said the Trader. "What brings you to the Waste, friend?"

Technoblade squinted his eyes, glancing to the right and to the left, with an air of great suspicion. "Ah," he said, "that's a secret."

The Trader laughed, but Technoblade could see the curiosity in his eyes. "Oh don't fear, friend. I keep secrets well."

"Well," Technoblade said, pretending to be won over, dropping his voice down to a hint of a whisper. "I have stolen a treasure."

These were in the days where in the Nether, treasure was for taking. Like kingdoms and warriors and gold, if you were strong enough, anything could be yours. The Trader looked at Technoblade with newfound respect, curiosity in the corners of his eyes. "Tell me about the treasure," he said, and when Technoblade saw that there was greed in his voice, he smiled.

"Here," he said, and produced the two golden hoops.

The Trader wrinkled his nose. "Forgive me, friend, but this seems like a paltry treasure."

"So it would appear," Technoblade agreed, and tried to use the voice that the storyteller in his bastion would use when she had some great and mystical tale to share. "But these earrings are magical. They say the person who carries them can walk, almost unseen, through the Nether. I have worn them and even the ghasts did not see me! My hooves were quiet, as if they were wrapped in Nylium."

The eyes of the Trader were very greedy indeed. "What a treasure," he said slowly. "I am sure you would not part with them."

"Not for anythin'."

"I have a vial of ghast tears."

"I can gather my own."

"Ender pearls."

"I've got an axe, I'm not a noob."

"Leather armor."

"I'm fine without it."

The Trader was hungry now. He pulled from his shoulder the great red cloak. "This was made from the finest materials in the Overworld. It is soft and warm and of exceeding beauty."

Technoblade pretended to hesitate for a moment. "I have no use for somethin' warm in the Nether."

"There is nothing like it anywhere."

"Fine," Technoblade said. "I suppose. If you insist."

* * *

Technoblade returned to the Blood God in triumph, and laid the treasure at the foot of their throne. "I'm back," he said, "and I have brought with me your blood-red cloak." A thousand hands reached for his offering, stroking the soft wool. "Now give me what you promised."

Our power, the Blood God mocked, *in exchange for a red cloak, little trickster? You are more foolish than we thought! Fetch us, little hero, a golden crown, and then we will talk.*

Now this did not seem quite fair to Technoblade, but one did not argue with gods, and you must remember that this was before he himself was the blood god. So he turned and left and went in search of a golden crown.

* * *

For a week he walked, through blue and red forests, climbing the spirals of basalt deltas, trying hard not to accidentally let his tail slip into the hidden pools of lava. Finally, on the seventh day he saw the dark stone of a lone bastion rising up against orange lava and red netherrack. As he stood, considering if he should approach it, he heard the voice of a Scout call to him.

"Hello Traveler!" the Scout said, swinging down from a higher layer of the netherrack. Her companions followed her, three other Piglins in leather armor with golden axes strapped to their backs. "I see you are a warrior. What brings you here?"

Technoblade hesitated. "I am in search of an adventure," he told her. "Tell me, whose Bastion is that?"

"That Bastion is ours," the Scout said. "Or at least we live there."

The ruler of it is a great king in the Nether," another said. "He has conquered many other Bastions and taken their children to train as his warriors. All the land for a three-day's journey from here belongs to him."

"He is a very strong ruler, then," Technoblade said. "A brute worthy of your service."

"He is cruel," the third of the Scouts said, and the others nodded. "He starves the surrounding bastion to make him and his army fat. He takes and refuses to protect the lands he has conquered."

"Many Piglins have tried to challenge him," the first Scout said, and her face fell. "But none yet have succeeded. But you look like a good warrior. If you were to defeat him, his whole land would be yours."

Technoblade shook his head. “I have no use for land.”

“His servants would be your servants,” the second interjected. “You would never want anything.”

Technoblade frowned, “I have no desire for servants.”

The final scout laid his hoof on Technoblade’s arm. “He has beautiful golden armor and a crown of gold. It would all belong to you.”

Technoblade looked up. “A golden crown, you say?”

* * *

The three scouts escorted him to the throne room of the mighty king. It was a glorious place, adorned in gold. The walls were lined with guards, while the King lounged on his throne. He was twice as big as any of his warriors, a powerful brute, missing an eye beneath a terrible scar. He was dressed in beautiful armor with a great diamond axe, unlike anything Technoblade had ever seen, resting beside him. On his head sat a crown, glittering in the firelight. Gemstones, rare, from the Overworld, glinted in reds and greens and blues along his brow.

“Who is this?” the King drawled, and his voice shook the throne room. His subjects trembled. Technoblade did not. He had seen the Blood God and lived. Any mortal king of the Nether seemed paltry in comparison with their glory and horror.

“I have come to challenge you, King of the Nether,” Technoblade said. He drew his iron axe, and the King’s guards surged forward. “If I win, I will take your crown.”

“If *I* win,” the King said lazily, “insolent child, I will take your head!”

“Agreed.” Technoblade gripped his axe, and the guards fell back into a ring. Their eyes were wide as the King descended from his throne, resplendent in his terror, swinging his axe in wide strokes.

And then the fight began, and there would be nothing like it again. The King was powerful. His axe smashed the stone and shook the foundations of the bastion. His armor turned away Technoblade’s axe time and time again. But for all his power, he was not a clever warrior, nor a fast one. Technoblade dodged beneath his blows, weaving through their tiny battlefield, seeking an opening. He could feel the eyes of the King’s subjects on him and he knew they were on his side. They wanted to see the King’s downfall as much as he did.

So he waited for his moment, and when it came, he leaped, rolling over the King’s armored shoulder and sinking his axe deep into the back of his neck. For a moment the King roared and swayed before he fell in a great crumbling heap, the collapsing clatter of his great axe and his golden armor and his jeweled golden crown releasing the great death peal as it hit the floor.

Silence fell over the crowd of piglins, and then with a grave wave of shouts they descended. For a moment Technoblade feared they would take vengeance on him for their fallen King, but instead they lifted him onto their shoulders and shouted his name, and placed the golden crown on his head.

“Come!” they said, “Be our king!”

But Technoblade shook his head and when they were not paying attention, he slipped away from the bastion, taking the crown with him.

* * *

Technoblade returned to the ruined bastion, and threw down the golden crown at the foot of the throne. It rolled to a stop, ringing like bells in the empty hall.

“Blood God,” Technoblade said. “Here is your crown. Take it and give me what you promised!”

The Blood God reached out and took the crown, passing it from hand to hand to hand. *You think our power is only worth a golden crown and a cape? You truly do not know the strength you seek.*

Technoblade ground his teeth, and barred his tusks. “How many quests will you demand from me?” he said, “What more will you ask?”

Little hero, the Blood God purred, *Bring us three skulls from the wither skeletons in the fortresses and we will give you our power.*

At this, Technoblade felt fear run cold through him. You must remember that he was not yet the Blood God, and the fortresses were wastelands no piglin dared enter. And for good reason too; they were home to blazes, all manner of monsters, and of course, wither skeletons. No death was quite as horrible as being withered away, your bones and flesh crumbling to blackened dust.

Well, little hero, the Blood God asked, silibent and horrifying. *Will you go?*

“Yes,” Technoblade said, and tried to look the Blood God in the eyes and found himself drowning in them. “I will.”

For a fortnight he walked, dragging his hooves through shadowed valleys while the soul sand whispered back his fears. He passed through the great ribcages of shattered monsters, flesh stripped away by time and shapes taken from the memory. He walked until his fear had sunk deep somewhere into his bones and became lodged in his joints.

But his tribe needed the power of the Blood God, and the Blood God needed a blood-red cloak, a crown of gold, and the skulls of three wither skeletons.

On the fourteenth day, Technoblade found an entrance to a fortress. There, in the darkness of the red brick hallway, (red in the same way long-dried blood is red) he imagined he heard the hiss of fire, and the groaning of the zombie creatures that had once been piglins like him, and perhaps, in the depth, the rattling of bones.

It took many days for him to secure the skulls. He built himself a flimsy shield of warped stem, and wrapped his forearms with vines as protection from the swords of the wither skeletons. To tell of all that happened in that fortress would take a week: of the strange encounters with the zombified piglins, of the oracle draped in soul-sand that foretold his glory and gave him a raven’s feather from the Overworld, of the treasure he discovered in the depths of that hallowed and horrible place. It is enough for you to know that he survived the withering danger, and after a long time, gathered up the three skulls he needed. And, what you really need to know is this: he was brave enough to stay.

So Technoblade brought the three skulls to the throne of the Blood God. But he did not offer them up. He held them in one hand, fingers woven through jawbones and eye sockets, and with his other hand, he clutched a handful of soul sand, cold against his skin.

“Are you happy now?” he demanded. “You have what you asked for. Give me your power.”

Or what, child? They asked, and grinned at him with sharpened teeth.

Technoblade pulled the soul sand from his pouch, whispering, and held the skulls aloft. “Then we might have to start thinkin’ about more dramatic negotiations.”

The Blood God stirred upon the throne, blinking at him from a dozen different eyes. *Reckless hero,* They said. *We are the Blood God. But they were watching the skulls in his hand carefully.*

And Technoblade threw the soul sand, directly into their open eyes.

They heaved and screamed with surprise. Heroes are reckless, but gods are smug. They are prepared for the desperate and foolhardy heroes, but they are not always so prepared for the truly brave and desperately devoted. Their dark hands reached for him, but with his axe, Techno cut his way through, cleaving away the darkness. He knew, as all mortals know deep inside them, that he could not kill a god. But of course, they can still bleed.

The story says-- and you will have to decide for yourself if this is true--

that Technoblade and the Blood God fought for a year, until there were no standing stones left in the ruined bastion and the sound of it was like endless thunder across the whole Nether.

But this is true: when the fighting quieted, Technoblade stood, torn with exhaustion, and the Blood God across from him, ripped and broken. And from the depths of the throne, the Blood God took, with a dozen hands, the red cloak and laid it across his shoulders. And they took the golden crown and placed it upon his head. And in his hands lay the skulls he had taken from the fortress.

You have proven yourself worthy, the Blood God said. *And you have completed the tasks.* Their voices hissed and bubbled like lava in a caldron. *You have earned the power of the Blood God.*

The hands reached for him, the eyes beheld him, and the mouths consumed him, and then, there was no Blood God. There was no Technoblade. There was only one, in the ruined bastion. Technoblade, the Blood God, cloaked in red, red as blood, crowned like a king, wielding strength and terror.

Inside his head the voices hummed a chorus of destruction, rattling through his bones.

Blood, the voices sang. *Blood. Blood for the Blood God!*

Later, blood would be spilled. Later, victory would be gained, later, empires to be conquered and friends to take and hold, and gold to collect, and wars to be fought. But for now---

His quests completed, the Blood God went home to his bastion.

Voluntary Exile

WHEN WE TELL the stories of the heroes and kings, the cat is never one of them. So you probably haven't heard the story of the mine he made for Theseus, his war with the thunder god, and his time in the church of Hbomb himself. And you definitely haven't heard of his time beyond the grave.

Here is what there is to know: the cat had a lover who died, ages ago, long before he came to the place we call Dreamlands. And the cat would do anything to bring that man back.

I will also tell you what he looked like. Dark paws, dark tail, and a back like milk. Blue eyes that they say turned red when he was in the service of the Crimson. I will tell you all of his form; that he was a cat who walked like a man, or perhaps a man who walked as a cat. I have told you all this, but what truly needs to be said is: the wild thing who stalked in the dark, the cat called Antfrost, knew what grief was and he knew it very well.

Nine lives, the cat had, and he was powerful enough that he managed not to lose a single one the day he killed the totem god they call Foolish. He dragged Foolish's soul to the throne of his master the Crimson and offered it up, and in exchange he asked for his lover back. A man long dead by the laws of the land, the revival of a man whose name we only know through the lover who refused to forget him. Ant brought the Crimson the life of a god and begged it for the return of Red Velvet.

The Crimson was two breaths from draining Foolish's soul forever and giving the cat back the only thing he loved. And that is when the Captain arrived, vengeful for her dead son, axe in hand. She killed Antfrost there on the red stones and somewhere in the depths of death, amidst the shreds of one of nine lives, the taint of the deal he made with Crimson fled his mind and he was once more lucid, in the coolness of his afterlife.

They say his limbo was a forest. I tell you this, and it is as my mother told me. In his death the cat was a vast, furred creature once more and he stalked through moss-thick, fern-lashed forests with heavy droplets hanging from misted leaves. He walked and he miauled, as if he once more was a soft-pawed kitten with eyes still closed. He yowled in grief and regret of all the things he'd done; the gods he had slain in pursuit of a deal poorly made.

You know the stories of death. You know the stories of men like Jack Manifold who saw the tunnel yawning ahead of them and chose to turn the other way, men who have clawed from the depths propelled by their own blind rage and denial. You know stories of men who refuse to die.

Antfrost was not one of those men. We tell those tales in the storybooks of heroes, and the Cat lay only one-ninth in the void and yet was too ashamed to walk back. He had friends he believed he could not face and he had apologies he believed he could never truly make.

Three days, the cat stayed dead. In the realm of dealth, that time was so much longer. Month on month he paced, silent, through mist-laden forests in joyless grey dawns. Day after day, where sunlight never waxed or waned past heavy gloom for his animal eyes to peirce through.

And on the third month he was walking once more, as he did always, and he smelt something other than moss and moist soil. He smelt something sweet, the scent of a man known long ago. And Velvet came to him, then, having walked the afterlife as a ghost until he'd once more felt Ant's presence.

I would tell you of the meeting they had, if I had the words.

My mother did not have the words. Her grandmother did not have the words, nor her mother, nor hers. What we know of the meeting, the rejoining of man and beast as two halves long lost, is this.

Ant loved Velvet enough to kill gods to have him back.

Velvet loved Ant enough to cross death to see him.

They were separated from each other for five hundred years, or forty-nine months, or however you care to call that mixing of time between their realms. They missed each other. And the joy that they had, in the twilight of Antfrost's limbo, is one which neither you or I will ever be able to experience unless we first truly understand grief as they did.

I have never been told this, but I believe that most of what was said all came out to mean *"I love you"*.

So Velvet said to his lover, "have you lived well, since I've gone?"

And Antfrost had to think over it all, the things he had done, the stories he'd birthed which make most children call him villain to this day. And he spoke in the mist, and he said, "I've lived for you."

There were many things to tell. But in the land of the dead the clocks run slow and there was time for Ant to tell Velvet of every mistake and sparse smile.

And after he was done, with tales of ram-men and demigods and blood red vines, Velvet took his hand and kissed him again on the brow.

"My love, my love," he said, "but have you lived *well*?"

"I've missed you," Antfrost admitted. "I've lived missing you."

Velvet released him, then, pressed his own dead hands to his own dead chest.

"I was only a man," he said, and it was both a plea and a reprimand. "With all the life you've left, there's so much else for you."

Ant shrugged, cat-man in human form, shoulders hunched and tail lashing.

"I don't know what else to do," he admitted to the mist and the towering trees around them.

Velvet sighed and took Ant's hand once more. And despite all his years spent apart from his lover, at that moment he had nothing to say.

They walked. For a long, long while they walked and for that time they spoke no longer of deaths too soon and lives ill spent. For a long while they walked, in mist and in dew, in the forest of the afterlife, in the limbo of the cat who was a man.

They talked of other things. They talked of the flowers in the garden they shared and they talked of animals in a sanctuary Ant had built on his own. They talked of foods long uneaten and shared laughter long unvoiced. They were two dead men in the forest of death and all they could think of was one another and the life they hadn't had the chance to share.

Death is not a cruel woman; she never has been. Their time was longer than it should have been and softer than it should have been and sweeter than it should have been. Their time was towering trees and the smell of moss and hands that were warm despite them both being dead. Their time was love, left unspoken for months and for years, that finally had a chance to give voice.

And their time was, eventually, Velvet turning to his lover and speaking the words that one of them did not want to hear.

"You can't stay here forever, Ant," he sighed.

"What else am I to do? Go back to a world where I'll never see you again?"

"Yes," Velvet said simply, "you are. I'm gone, Ant. I'm a dead man without even a ghost to my name. Do you really think I'm worth more than anything out there? Even the flowers you always let wither are more alive than I am."

"You don't understand, Velvet. That's why I don't *want* to go back."

Antfrost's voice was the loudest thing in the realm of the dead and when his sentence ended the echo rang on into the eternity of that forest.

The silence sat between them until it was so heavy that it forced from his lungs the words he didn't want to say.

"There's nothing that's worth it as long as you're not there."

The silence sat between them.

I do not know what broke that silence. None of us will never know what Velvet said then, for the cat spoke of it to no one but his closest friends, and even to them in only the barest of terms. What Velvet said was long and from the heart and all I know is this:

He spoke of the difference between things that matter and things that do not.

Do not love the dead over the living, he said. *Do not sacrifice those still breathing to those who lie still.*

But I know that there most have been more. The Cat called Antfrost was heartless for a long, long time. He was the right hand to demons and the killer of gods. He spent years on years in pursuit of nothing but a man long dead. Yet there was something there that meant something, something that touched him where he'd given up.

What does it take to let go of someone you've done nothing but love?

What does it take to let go of someone who lives on more in your memory than anywhere else? What does it take to let go when they are underground and all you have, when you have nothing but their memory, when you are no one but someone who misses them? I will never know, and I'll never be able to say.

My mother told me this story once, after the death of her husband. And she said this:

"Do not sacrifice those still breathing to those who lie still."

She was silent for a long, long time, after. And she finally spoke again and she said, *"it is a hard, hard lesson to learn."*.

And as I sat there, just as attentive as you are now, she said so softly that I barely heard it: *"it does not get easier"*.

Ant asked his lover as such, when they stood under Death's towering trees. He wept at the words he could not deny and he held Velvet tight as if it would protect him from having to let go once more.

"Will it get easier without you?" he asked.

Velvet held him just as close and just as strong, and his was not as much the grip of a drowning man as it was the grip of a man breathing life into lungs lying still.

"I don't know," he said. He wept, then, for he knew he was saying goodby. "I don't know, but I hope it does. It's time to wake up, my love."

They held each other for a long, long time.

But finally Antfrost mustered the strength he had left left. Finally the Cat turned his back on death and clawed his way up with what remained of nine lives. And he woke up scarred and panting in the sweat of his revival, woke with the smell of blood still in his nose and with tears on his cheeks.

In his head he could still find the ghost of his lover's warmth, the last touch before he chose to live again. So he wiped the tears from his eyes and he rose from his cot and he chose to live for more.

He did not know if it would get easier. But he knew there was no other way to find out.

There is more after, of course, for the Cat went on to do more than even I have heard tales of. But all of none of it would have happened without him choosing more. All of it stems from those dreadful days in a death of his own desiring, and from the words of a man long dead telling him to crave life more than things he has lost.

Of those that refuse to pay the ferryman

THE LAST NIGHT of Philza's life started like a hundred others; with a drink and a piece of stale bread. And like those hundred other nights, orange torch light bloomed above him in the crowded bar as he gratefully finished his drink. Not his first of the night, though normally his last.

Philza would never know exactly what pushed him to stay there. Maybe it was the cold autumn wind outside, or the sound of the ocean just a few hundred feet away from the bar. Maybe it was the people seated next to him, all loudly chirping about their days and their plans. After all, the night was young, and the moon had only just begun to rise.

The bar was comfortable, far more than the previous one Phil had been to. This one actually had cushions on the stools and chilled bottles that hadn't been left in the sun for days on end.

Of course, the drinks were only cold because of the style of the establishment, much more a large tent with seats and a circular bar in the centre. The wind, the spray of the ocean caught in the air—it was free to brush by and press against Phil's skin and clothes.

But the firepit and the torches were warmer than the rest of the world at that moment, and maybe that was why Philza ordered another drink, an excuse to stay somewhere he didn't know just for the warmth; a pirate caught in a siren's lull.

With each sip, that fiery warmth found its way inside Phil's chest, and he welcomed it. He welcomed it for far longer than he ever meant to.

The bar rattled as a hand slammed down in front of Phil, and he jolted back, his mind shaking with the wood. He blinked harshly and looked around, squinting at the dampened sunlight finding its way into his eyes.

It was morning? Shit, probably really early. There were still one or two other patrons clearing out.

Phil's eyes eventually landed on the man in front of him.

"Tab," The barkeep said.

"I didn't—" Phil paused for a moment, resting his face in his hand. "I didn't ask for the tab."

"Storm incoming, everyone's gotta go."

Philza groaned but didn't fight back, drawing himself to his feet and reaching for his satchel. He dug around for a moment, his hand pressing against nothing as he paused, before his gaze returned to the barkeep.

"So mate, you'll never believe this, but I don't seem to have any coins anymore." Though he was sure he had had some when he entered. The negatives of passing out in a bar, he supposed.

Phil was not surprised nor pleased when he was thrown down into the mud, a rough shout of "dirty bum!" coming from behind him.

Standing and brushing himself off—it did nothing, the wet dirt staining his hands—Phil lumbered forward. He did not know where he was going, but before him was a path, and it had to lead somewhere. This mountainside, oceanside town had to have an inn, at least a bench with a cover where Phil could wait out the already drizzling rain.

Half drunk, Phil walked the length of the stone road, bumbling through the downpour. As the winds grew harsher, it beat against his skin, and he resisted the urge to throw a fist up at the sky, to curse out the gods.

To his left was nothing but a forest rising up into the beautiful mountains, and to his right was simply a cliffside, the harsh ocean raging below in the rocks.

Phil walked on. He regretted selling his shoes for sandals as he shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. His simple chiton covered by a long robe was excellent for the desert he had just travelled out of, but it did very little for any other atmosphere.

Absently, Phil kicked a rock. Following it kept him focused, his mind blurring, his senses phasing in and out of his grasp. Gods, he'd had too much to drink. Once his head wasn't pounding, he'd criticise himself to death for his actions.

The rock clattered against a wood post and Phil raised his eyes from the soaked ground. There stood a sign at a crossroads, two names and two directions.

Phil stared them both down for a minute.

Right. That had been his goal with visiting the bar—to learn where he was and where was the closest actual settlement.

Phil evaluated the two paths quickly, eventually settling for heading up the mountain. Surely these people wouldn't build their homes right by the ocean, that'd be a major risk of flooding considering how heavy the rain was already. If this weather were a regular occurrence, it would pose a major threat.

Unless, of course, the townspeople simply weren't as smart as Philza. And it was possible, but he was willing to take his chances.

Phil marched up the path with relative ease, if one were to consider stumbling and slipping on rocks walking with ease.

He continued on regardless of his inebriated state, desperate to find the quickest way out of the storm.

The rain continued to beat down on him, until it was all he could hear. The forest was a void of all that once was there, save for Phil and the way he dragged himself along. The whipping of the wind against him and the crashing of the rain were his sole companions.

The rush of water grew and grew until Phil set his foot down and was met with no stable ground. He slid and tried to regain his footing, but landed in the mud on his side with a groan.

The stones in the path had faded off at some point—Phil didn't know where—and he'd been left with a thinning path into the trees and the dirt. There, laying on the ground, Philza sighed. He must have gone the wrong way.

The rain continued to pour. Philza shivered as he sat up, but he knew that at least the rain wouldn't kill him. He'd last with just being cold.

The town must have been down the other path. Simple enough directions to follow, Phil figured as he began to walk once more, this time back to where he had come from.

Through it all, the rain persisted. It crashed through the sky into Phil, it soaked him from his hair to his bones, and brought a thoroughly unwelcomed chill to his skin. The sound of it, with how heavy it was, Phil was tempted to cover his ears. To drown out the water hitting against him like the ocean against a rocky shore. He shivered so harshly, it was almost like the world was shaking and not him.

But the chill of the rain had provided one good thing. It cleared his mind. The cold air and the wetness had begun to sober him.

In his proper mind, Philza noticed two things.

The ground was shaking, and there was no way that the rain was making that much noise. The rain beat—it did not crash.

And, were he to notice a third thing, his feet were sinking into slowly seeping mud.

Philza froze.

And he began to run.

Phil barely made it back to the sign before the mudslide hit him. On the last day of Philza's life, he was thrown over the cliff into the unforgiving ocean.

Phil awoke in water, resting on his back as it lapped against him, not even high enough to reach his ears. Considering in his last moments of consciousness, he had sunken far below the surface of the ocean, this was an improvement.

Phil sat up slowly, his eyes trailing across the—room?

Where…

This was not the inside of any kind of building, but at the same time, Phil couldn't say he was outdoors.

For as far as he could see, there was nothing. Enough light to see himself clearly, but no source of any kind. There was the thin layer of water, and then the blackness stretched on for miles, as though Phil had been dropped in the midnight sky.

In the bottom of his stomach, Phil fought against an ache—a worry that he had hit the rocks a little too hard.

Water dripped from his fingertips as he languidly raised a hand, still staring out into the nothingness. Phil pressed his palm to the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair. Strangely, despite having been in the water, he wasn't wet.

He breathed, slow, before pulling his hand away. The sight of blood on his palm ripped a tight gasp from his chest.

"I'm sorry." A voice spoke and Phil barrelled to his feet, stumbling through the water. He spun around as he searched for the source of the voice, his eyes landing right behind where he'd been sitting.

There stood a woman donned in dark robes, a large brimmed hat adorned with a dark veil draping down into the water beneath her feet. She smiled softly with her hands together, and maybe Phil would've been able to focus on the words she was beginning to say if not for the fact that she was, at least, ten feet tall.

Phil stumbled back, kicking up the water around his feet as he tried to remain upright.

"But let's cut to the chase, shall we?" She chuckled, and Phil blinked tightly as he tried to figure out whether he was dreaming or not.

The woman paused, staring down at Phil before waving one of her hands out. "Hello?"

Phil tensed and snapped his gaze to her. "Hi—yes, hi!"

"Glad to see you're conscious. I take it you didn't hear me."

“Uh—yeah. Not exactly sure of what’s… this shit.” Phil motioned around the endless void.

He was fairly certain of what it was, but if someone could reassure him that it was something other than limbo, he’d be eternally thankful.

“Oh, well simply put, you’re dead.” She smiled.

Ah.

That was…

God, Phil didn’t have a reaction for that.

Grieving other people or hearing of death in the world, it was decidedly easier to process than the idea that he himself was gone.

“Oh,” he chirped.

The woman’s smile grew a bit more forced—or, should Phil even call her that? What was she if he was already dead?

Maybe an angel? Or maybe Death herself. Phil didn’t exactly like either option considering the implications of seeing them. Though he was already dead, he couldn’t get any more dead.

“I’m sure that you’re feeling very—distressed, but death is a simple process!” Death clapped her hands together, stepping towards Phil. “I just need your full name and your birthdate.”

Phil breathed deeply. “Mate, you mean *dead* dead.”

“Yes, you’re dead.”

“Like—like, comple—”

Death raised a hand. “Dead. That’s it. All there is to it.”

“I—I don’t—” Phil gasped out a breath, flexing his hands unsurely as he sputtered through his words. “What am I supposed to do? I was going to… to have a kid. And get married. Or I wanted to.”

“I’m sure—”

“—and I was gonna build. Incredible things, really mate, I—I had ideas, plans, I—”

“Yeah, you’re not doing any of that anymore though, so—”

“Oh god.” Phil stumbled back, his breath catching in his throat. “Oh my god, no, no… what… what do I do?”

“You tell me your name and birthdate. Please.”

Phil gaped at Death for a moment, barely managing to exclaim “*I’m dead*,” through a sob.

Death nodded and tisked softly. “I know this is a very sensitive thing, but you must understand, I have to see hundreds of thousands of people every day. You’ll have to forgive my… lack of care—my urgency.”

Phil continued to stare silently for a moment. “What, I don’t matter?”

“No—no, it’s just… can we get this moving?”

“No, absolutely not! I’m not—I won’t tell you anything. You can’t take me then, can you?” Phil defiantly crossed his arms, as if delaying his death would stop it from happening. Or delaying his transport, he was already dead, wasn’t he?

Death sighed, ducking her head down. “Please, just tell me. *Please*.”

Phil huffed, ignoring the rational part of his brain telling him he was acting like a child. “Absolutely not. You can pry it from my dead hands.”

“Well, you’re already—”

“You know what I meant.”

Phil wasn’t sure what launched a tirade from him, but within a minute, he was pacing back and forth in the water, shouting anything that came into his mind. He *had* just died, he felt justified in being frustrated.

Dead.

That wasn’t a very pleasant thought, and Philza would be damned if he didn't try to get out of it. Surely if this goddess dealt with an uncountable number of deaths per day, she could make a mistake. Unintentionally offer some kind of escape. Phil knew he was crafty enough to get it, to trick her.

Phil continued on with his rant, only freezing and letting his words fall to silence when a response came from Death.

Well, a response of sorts. She sniffled.

Phil, facing away from her as he stared out into the nothing, scrunched up his face.

"I—" she sniffed again. "I'm sorry, I know this... is hard. It's just..."

Death huffed, and with tensed shoulders, Phil turned to look at her. Her lips were pulled down, her eyes watery, and Phil just about gutted himself to avoid grimacing at her expression.

"It's kind of a thankless job. And people make it so much more difficult, do you—do you know what it's like to have to tell people they're dead and then have to work to get their name out of them, it—and there's been so many plagues recently, and floods, and storms, and—"

Death sobbed, burying her face in her hands.

Phil stiffened.

This had not been his goal. He hadn't wanted to upset her, just bother her enough to let him go.

"Hey, mate." Phil drew out his words as he stepped across the plain, awkwardly reaching out. He briefly considered setting a hand on her shoulder before realising that even if he wanted to, she was much too tall. "It's fine. Look, it—my name is Philza Minecraft. It—"

"—great, thank you." Death raised her head back up, a thin smile across her face.

She stepped away before Phil could question why she visibly hadn't been crying, and she knelt down in the water, placing her hands against the ground.

"Wh—you tricked me!" Phil shouted out, throwing his hands out.

"Yep."

Phil rolled his eyes, biting down another rant. "You didn't even get my birthdate."

Death, surprisingly, laughed. "As if there's anyone else in the world named *Philza Minecraft*."

Phil bit his tongue and didn't dignify her with a reply.

Perhaps he had been acting out before, but he had reason to. He was dead! Completely and utterly dead, with blood still dripping down into the water beneath him.

He didn't even know what awaited him on the other side and frankly, he didn't want to find out. It may have been a bit childish to want to whine, but it simply wasn't fair. Why did he have to brave this new part of his lack of life? He'd done nothing wrong.

And yes, he understood simply enough that that was how life went regardless of one's desires to live and love, but damn it, Philza wouldn't stand for it.

Death continued to hold her hands in the water, and as Phil asked her what she was doing, she began to explain that she had to catalogue Phil's death. Had she failed to find out who he was, there'd have been chaos.

If people who were supposed to be dead weren't, then what was stopping anyone from simply refusing to die? What was stopping anyone from exploiting death?

So it had to be tracked, which meant work and more work for Death. Or Kristin, as she called herself.

Perhaps there was nothing left for Phil to do but accept his fate.

Or perhaps Kristin had just handed him a golden way out.

"So, all you do is work? And it's a very time consuming job?" Phil held back a smile as she nodded along.

"I get down time now and again, but it's a lot."

Phil hummed inquisitively, stepping closer to Kristin. "You know mate, I've been told time and time again that I'm a *very* reliable person. See, I had a job like yours as well. Always doing work and dealing with frustrating people, it drains you."

Kristin chuckled softly, and Phil nearly cheered as she failed to see through his bold-faced lies.

"Yeah, life isn't great, huh? You are dead though, so that's not your problem anymore."

"Well, see—" Phil shuffled in front of her and knelt down. "Mate, I get it. I've been in your position, so how about you let me help you out, like I wish someone had done for me."

For the first time since placing her hands in the water, Kristin looked up.

"You want to help me?"

"Yes, yes." Phil nodded quickly. "Let me do you a favour! Just—you know, skip me. Send me back—that's a lot less work for you, after all."

"Send—" Kristin fell silent for a moment before she broke out into laughter, shaking her head as she returned to her task of staring at the ground. "Oh, you didn't listen at all to me."

"Well..."

"But—help isn't a terrible idea. I *have* been wondering about getting an aide or two."

Phil perked up. "Like a colleague?"

"More like an underling."

"And you'd be the boss?"

Kristin smiled, her dark eyes shining. "And you, my angel of death. Exactly."

An aide to the goddess of death—an angel of death.

It was certainly a title, one nothing like anything Phil had held before.

Such a position would probably bring quite a few problems, however. After all, Kristin had just complained about the work, and chances were Philza would forever be her immortal angel.

Did Phil want to condemn himself to a life like that?

Immortality, recognition as a minor godly figure, never again bothered by hunger or exhaustion or living temptations, never struggling to get by, never dealing with mortal tribulations—

Well, a bit of work really didn't sound all that bad. His alternative was *to die.*

"I'll do it." Phil said quickly. "I'll be your angel."

Kristin finally raised her hands from the water and clapped them together, her smile growing. "Hmm! Well, let's get that sorted, why don't we?"

"Do I have to—do anything? To become it?"

"Yes." Kristin paused, her expression of joy fading. "A trial. Are you up for it?"

A trial?

Perhaps Phil didn't have to die or become her angel.

Phil nodded. "I will do anything."

Not exactly a lie, but Phil had his limits. He just needed this out, and it seemed that Kristin was falling for it. Once he had his way out of limbo, he'd leave Kristin and the job high and dry.

Kristin stood, raising her hands up, and Phil stood with her unsurely.

Distantly, the void seemed to glow deep purple and orange hues, the water beginning to spiral around Philza's feet.

"Excellent! Then, I'll see you in... oh, say a hundred years should be good?"

Before Phil could even try to inquire about his trial, Kristin snapped her fingers, and Phil was falling. Within just a moment, the darkness leaving him as he fell through an endless sky, Phil hit water and sunk.

He sputtered unconsciously, waving his arms around as he tried to recollect his surroundings. He was deep underwater, drowning, with a bright light shining in from above—actually, that was good enough for him.

Phil desperately swam against the pressure in his chest and the ache in his lungs. Thankfully he was near the surface and he broke through with a gasp, flailing around for a minute.

A bright blue sky and shining sun greeted him as he slowly settled, floating on his back as he caught his breath.

He was *not* in that void of death anymore. That was, undoubtedly, a good sign.

Phil looked around, finding himself in a river travelling through a forest of vibrant green trees past beaches of glittering sand. Wherever he wasn't, it wasn't that mountainside town of dark clouds and mud.

Had Death released him?

Or—no, surely not. She had to realise how stupid she was if she had just let him go to find something to prove himself. There was no way she was letting him find his own trial.

But it didn't seem like there was anything else at play.

Phil laughed and spun around, beginning to swim to the shore.

As soon as he was on dry land, he was off, running as far as his legs would carry him. Though he didn't know how far, there was bound to be a town, an encampment, some kind of settlement eventually.

Phil searched out into this beautiful world, a rejuvenated sense of colour in the plants and the sky, the shine of dew smiling back at him, alive and well.

To be given a second chance at life, to cheat Death—Phil was sure few had done it. But he did, and he wasn't about to spoil such a reward. No, he would reap it and wear it like a badge of honour.

However, for one to celebrate their achievements so loudly, there had to be people to watch. Friends and family and those in-between would be good enough. Phil hadn't been close to many people before, but he'd do his best to find some now, irreparably aware of how fleeting life was and how unfulfilled he'd felt all on his lonesome with not a scratch in the dirt to call his own.

So Phil searched, and an hour turned into two.

And two into a day.

And soon a day into a week, and with each passing second, a tightness in Phil's chest grew, and a week turned into two.

He lost track of time quickly, until eventually, standing in a field untouched by man, in a world with a beauty he could never dream, Phil had to recognize the possibilities of the reality he was living. That perhaps he hadn't escaped death just yet, that her trial was still looming over him.

That perhaps this was not his world, and he was utterly and truly alone.

The years passed. This world was dangerous and Phil was left with only his two hands and his head to survive. For each mob he killed, two more tried to tear him apart. He scavenged and fought, hunted and forged, built whatever he could to make it through the night.

It wasn't a pleasant life for the longest time, but it wasn't one Phil could say he hadn't known at times.

But at some point, when Phil found that he wasn't swarmed by creatures desperate to kill him, all dissuaded by his traps to fend them off, Phil took it upon himself to improve things. If he was stuck here, there was no point in wallowing in filth for decades.

It started simple enough with Phil picking a shape and colour and working to make his mess of wood and stone look something like a home.

He couldn't say when it had happened, but one day, he simply took a step back and noticed how his walls were lined with sets of armour and artefacts. How his scavenging had become exploring, how his foraging had become cooking, how surviving had become living—Phil would never truly know.

There, on his own, he did not starve or go cold. He cooked hearty meals and draped himself in warm apparel, with clothes he'd sewn on his own through trial and error, surprised to find that in being simply left alone in this world, he'd reached a level of wealth he never could have dreamed of.

There was no one to expect things of him, and when he no longer worried about how he looked or what he owned, when all material things started to lose their value beyond practicality and what he could make of them, Phil began to excel.

He couldn't pinpoint when it had happened, but he could pinpoint when he had realised how far he'd come. It was that moment of all things in his life that changed him.

This world was his, now.

Philza was alive.

And he did what he'd dreamed of always doing; he built.

From that moment, he sought out landmarks and ruins, the signs that perhaps this world had once been full of living beings much like him, and he marked them. With each passing day, each newly found indecipherable phrase carved into the side of a long since destroyed building, Phil studied and learned.

He learned of gods, of angels, of those like him brought to places like these—these empty worlds built for trials; Hardcore, the writings called it, the realms where people were left to fend for themselves to prove they were worthy.

Phil repaired the temples he found, draining flooded prismarine rooms, carving out halls and pathways, letting plants grow until what was once a grimey and forgotten ruin was nothing short of a blossoming haven.

There was pride in seeing his creations, how the water flowed down from the glass walls protecting the temple from the sea. Phil adored the sight of the coral and the flora, and he beamed as the sun shined down on him, his eyes barely peeking out from under his hat.

And through it all, Phil had found friends. Strange ones, and not exactly what he'd expected, but for each step he took in leaving his mark on this world, he found that the crows followed him too.

Phil braved the darkest parts of the Nether and the burning expanse of the fortresses within. Though he left soot covered and exhausted each night, his heart *yearned* for more.

One night, after hours spent hunched over a notebook, Philza found what he'd been searching for. Not the Nether nor the Overworld, but a third place spoken only of in fear and rumours.

And Phil wasted no time travelling there.

It was darker than the night, a barren and empty wasteland, and a beast resided in the centre, but Philza did not back down. Despite the power the dragon held, he stood his ground and fought.

Maybe it took hours, or maybe just minutes, but Phil bested it eventually and returned home once more.

This time, however, he was greeted by a gift of sorts—wings, black as obsidian with shining white diamond tips were attached to his back. Though he may have grown concerned by their sudden appearance at first, he recognized them for what they were. After all, what was an angel that could not fly?

The wings helped greatly as well in transforming the End into a beautiful place once more, doing all he could to fill the dry land with flourishing life, choosing to reverse what he had done to sunken temples, in a sense.

Philza was proud of what he'd made of the world, no matter how much he knew it would never last. There was beauty in impermanence. That was what he'd gathered from life, at least; that it was made to end so another could continue it.

While he was far different than before, longer hair framing his face with more than a few new lines around the corners of his eyes, and dark wings hanging from his back like a cloak, Phil still shared one trait with his younger self.

Neither of them were very good with time.

"So?" Kristin asked softly. "How was it?"

Philza once more stood in the low water of an endless void, but where there was once nothing, he could see flickers of light and warmth on the horizon.

"How was..." he trailed off, slowly stepping through the water and feeling it brush against his feathers.

"Your trial?"

Phil turned to face Death. Though he was sure he looked like an entirely different man, she still looked like that woman he had met long ago.

"Oh, it was... long."

He wasn't sure what she was expecting. When someone was left alone in an entire world for a hundred years, what was the usual response? Was he to comment on what he had done? How he'd felt?

Kristin chuckled softly at his words and Phil supposed they were good enough as she continued on.

"I'm sure. Your first hundred years are always a long time, I know it took me a while to find my footing. But I'm glad you've settled into immortal life; it seems you did well for yourself." She walked closer to Phil and held out her palm, a gentle smile on her face. "We probably shouldn't take too long to get into the swing of things. Work awaits."

Phil stared at her hand silently, almost studying it as she expectantly held it in place, waiting for him to take it.

Cautiously, as his wings tensed and his throat tightened, Phil wrapped his hands around hers and shut it.

"I'm very sorry, Kristin, but I have to decline your offer."

Kristin's expression shifted slowly, a look of shock overtaking her. "What?"

Her voice was stiff and unsure, a clear sign that no one had ever exactly refused a god before, much less Death.

Phil removed his hat from his head, pressing it to his chest as he spoke.

"I'm sorry to do this, mate, I'm sure that you could use the help, but—living in the Hardcore world has made it clear to me that living forever as a god isn't something I want."

"But you agreed to a deal."

"I know, it's just that I feel that I've left the mark I wanted to. I may have been alone but I'm at peace with who I am and what I've done." Phil took a breath, meeting her eyes. "Everything I built there and the things I learned—I had no one to prove my life to but myself, and I'm okay with dying. Maybe if I could return to my old life, I'd accept, but I can't take this position beside you."

Kristin paused. She looked up and down at Phil, that same shocked expression still resting on her face as she pulled her hand away.

After the silence dragged on for a minute, she huffed a short, incredulous laugh.

"Philza, I don't think you understand what's happening here."

Phil swallowed roughly. “I—”

“You made a deal with a god. As much as I’d like to help you out, I can’t take that deal back. I don’t have the power to. This is not a negotiation.”

That—that couldn’t be true.

Phil had decided years ago that he would refuse the offer once it came, this couldn’t be happening.

“What? Who does have the power, then?” He asked, doing what he could to hide the desperation in his voice.

“The gods above me, who I can’t bother with something like this.”

“But you can’t have—”

“Everyone has someone above them, Philza, and trying to scam your way out of death only to find you didn’t read the fine print is not going to bode well with them.” Kristin said, sticking her hand out once more. “You’re the Angel of Death, whether you like it or not.”

In another life, perhaps Philza had accepted his death when it first came. Perhaps he hadn’t been irrational and believed he was better than all who had come before, believed he could trick a god.

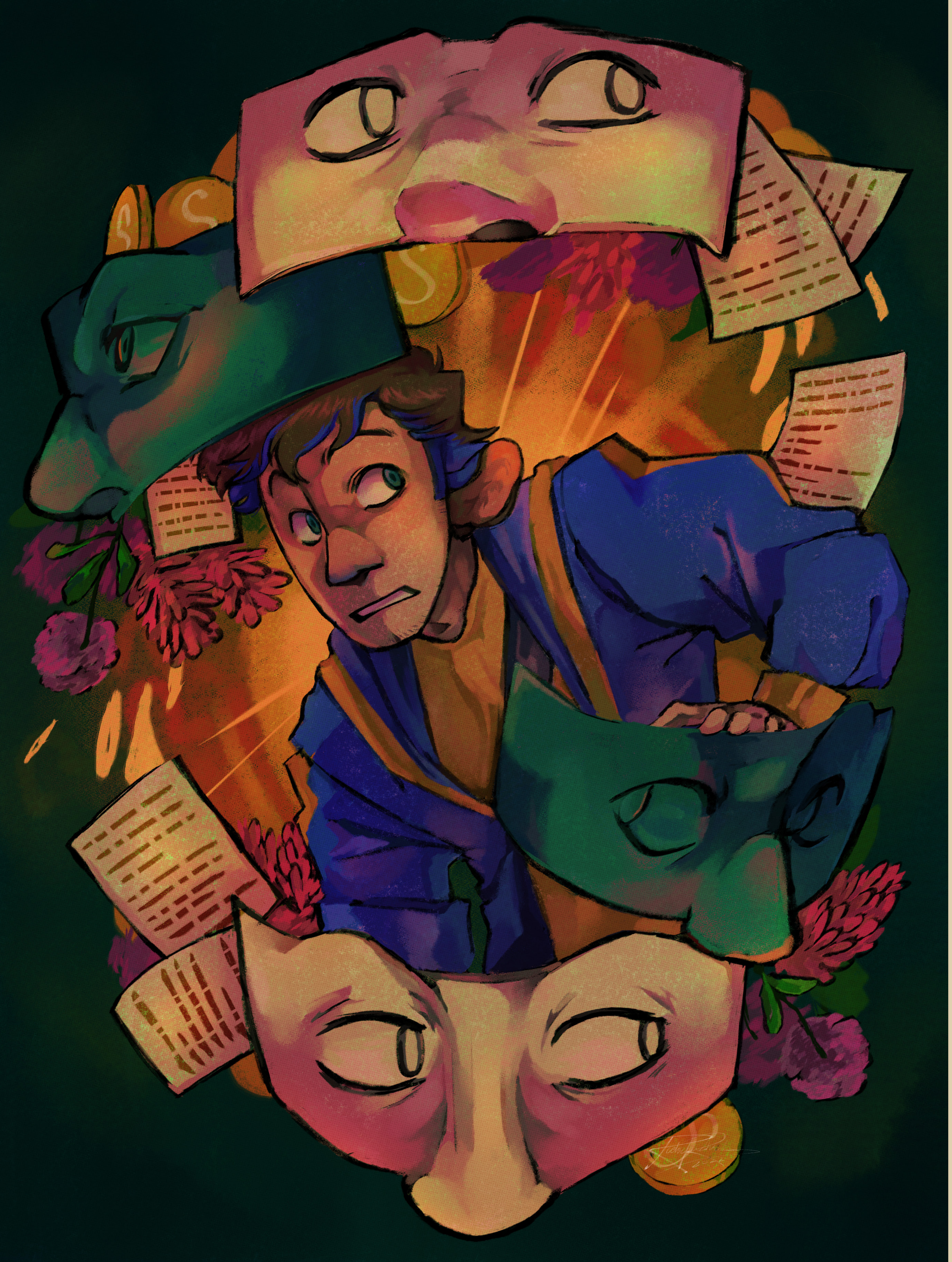
But that was not his life. Becoming the Angel of Death was.

With the weight of a hundred years on his back, Phil took Kristin’s hand.

Phil could not bring himself to resent Death. Though he’d never know from that one moment, he’d come to love her eventually more than he could have ever believed, but for those above her—those forcing him into a role he never wanted to play and dragging him around like a little puppet—Phil would hate them for all of time.

And so a simple promise was made that day.

Philza would never let himself be controlled again.



A Man Lost Through Time

LISTEN:

CONNOREATSPANTS HAS come unstuck in time.

He sat down to chat with his business partner JSchlatt only to turn around and find him across from him in a courtroom in the midst of a lawsuit only to next find himself alone, drifting, months after he'd first been told of his old friend's death.

He enters a new server, alone and unsure, only to next find himself settled into a little house, passively watching yet another court case unfold. Only for there to be a slightly more jarring shift, as he suddenly finds himself hosting a party with the ghost of that very friend alongside Karl, a time traveler still confused by the nature of his own existence. Connor doesn't know how to explain to him how little his confusion matters. Karl has the luxury of most often one moment passing into the very next moment. Connor doesn't have the chance to even attempt to give him an explanation, because now he is back to watching the bombs fall over a city-state he knows he had seen standing what felt like only a few hours ago.

"Hello? Connor?"

It's Ranboo. He knows Ranboo now. Ranboo is alive now.

He's sitting against a wall in a cell opposite Ranboo's. So, alive, but not for much longer.

"...what's up, man?" Connor blinks.

"You were telling me about..." Ranboo sounds reluctant. "Never mind. It's fine, really. I think I... I think I got the gist of it."

“Right, right,” Connor agrees quickly. He stares at the back wall. It’s going to break. If Ranboo is here, it won’t be much longer now.

* * *

Connor didn’t know Ranboo. Not yet. Right now the closest thing he has to a friend on this server is the grave he now stares at. He’s outside. The sky is overcast and behind him are fresh platforms built over a crater, in front of him is a grave he honestly thought his old pal Schlatt would have liked. It’s ornate, a tomb really.

Connor is almost tempted to ask Schlatt about his ideal resting place the next time he sees him, but he knows better by now. No one would understand. He could have warned Ranboo in the prison, and no one would have believed him. Better to just wait. If he waits, eventually they’ll be alive again.

* * *

Tommy is dead. He died in the prison. Connor is inside his house again. It’s a comforting thing to come back to, the occasional phases where he had been allowed to have Tommy’s house, and while there were other instances where he’d return there only to find Tommy still alive, free, or present, those times got annoying.

This time Connor knows it’s his house, because the rest of the server is in mourning. Ranboo had placed flowers outside Tommy’s door, because in this now Ranboo is still alive, and Tommy is dead.

Connor took a leaf out of Ranboo’s book. He has a diary now. It helps with his sense of time.

i miss my friend jschlatt

im gonna solve mortality

if it’s not that hard tho

if it’s a lot of work im good

–monday

Connor thinks it’s Monday.

* * *

Ranboo is still alive. Connor thinks Tommy is alive too. He’s running one direction across the Nether roof, he’s going to find people, he thinks. Ranboo, HBomb, and Foolish. He knows because of his chat messages. And then he isn’t on the Nether roof anymore. No wonder he keeps getting lost, he never sticks around long enough to remember where he’s going.

* * *

Connor is living in Tommy’s old house. It’s his house now, because… Connor scans the room. The ominous messages from Dream aren’t there, the walls are made of dirt. Connor steps outside and sees his own name over the doorway. It’s definitely his house, then.

Which is a bit strange because Connor turns around and sees Tommy crawling out of the sewer tunnels. Followed by Technoblade. Tommy is already a wave of chatter, Techno standing awkwardly between them.

“What’re you doing in my house?” Connor asks. It’s *his* house right now, he’s pretty sure. “What’s goin’ on?”

Tommy stops rambling and stops forward, colder now. He looks extra scrawny, he’s got bags under his eyes. That sort of look seems to come and go for Tommy. “This is *my* home, Connor.”

Connor disagrees. His name is over the door. So surely it’s his. Tommy disagrees as well. Connor turns around and finds the door has been blocked.

“If I was unexiled, would you give it back?” Tommy corners him.

Connor stares back, startled. Right. Tommy *isn't supposed to be here.* Connor points this out. Tommy doesn't take it well, and Connor finds himself walled in. He doesn't take that well either, frantic as he's trapped further, until there is only stone, not even light, Tommy and Techno's shouting muffled through it.

Connor screams for help. He knows no one is coming. He pounds against the stone until he can see light, and immediately it is replaced by another. Connor is used to being out of control, but now he's scared. He thought he would've been taken away by now, dragged to another point in time, but it's still just darkness, it's still just him pounding his fists bloody against cobblestone but every time he breaks it another stone takes its place. Connor doesn't know why *now* is when he gets to stay in one place, he didn't know that his existence out of time could also be freeing. He wants it to take him away again, he wants to go back to a time where he and Tommy are friends, he wants to go back home to when he and Schlatt were together, he wants *out of this box*–

Connor sees light and he bolts before Tommy can close him in again, but every exit is blocked and Tommy has a sword. Connor doesn't know how Tommy feels about him right now. The last Connor remembered, they were friends. Tommy promised him his house. Tommy doesn't look especially friendly right now.

"How much pain do you feel on a daily basis?" Tommy asks.

Connor thinks he can hear the blood rushing in his ears. *Daily? I don't have a daily.* He knows he can't say that, so instead he stammers out, "like... like on a scale?"

"Yeah. One to ten."

Connor doesn't know how to answer that. He doesn't have a daily, and sometimes he's in pain one second and then he's not. He decides to high ball the estimate. "Honestly, like a seven..?"

"You're about to be a nine, bitch!"

Connor doesn't want to be in this one anymore, he doesn't want Tommy to trap him again. He has never been able to control when he travels, and he accepts that often, but this is a bad one. Worse than most. "I don't... I don't wanna go back in the hole."

As with all things in Connor's life, he doesn't have a choice.

It continues and Connor can only listen from behind a wall. He doesn't think he knows how the rest of this one goes. He's a unique sort of scared right now, fear of the unknown is pretty rare for him.

"I don't wanna die..."

Connor doesn't remember what life he is on. They let him out, but Connor doesn't know if he should run. He's, ironically enough, not a very good runner.

"Hey Connor, how many hearts are you on?" Tommy asks.

"Uh, all of them?"

Connor sees Tommy raise a crossbow, and then he is no longer there.

Connor hasn't been shot. He feels a brief spark of relief, before recognizing his walls as that of a prison cell. Connor cannot remember why he was arrested. Only that he had been. Maybe it had been a mistake? Or it could've been some trouble with a fake I.D. Or living in a house that wasn't really his. Something like that, usually. Sam put him in here, because if the prison is in operation, Sam is no longer that pretty chill guy who gave out pumpkin pies and went running around with Ponk. He went running *after* Ponk, more like. Connor is used to being out of control, being locked in a cell isn't that different, really. Just boring. He would have a neighbor soon.

Soon *maybe*. It could take days more instead. He doesn't really know how long he is in the prison, how long he was. Would be. Semantics. It didn't really matter.

Connor is spot on this time around. He hears voices down the hall, one cold and unfeeling, the other deep and unsure.

“You wanted to be put in here–”

“And now I don’t, okay? I have people who need me and–”

“–And they’re safer with you in here.”

Connor goes to the iron door, pressing his face to the bars. “H-Hey! Hey, man I did *not* want to get put in here, so, maybe we could do a little, uh, a little switcheroo and that guy– oh, hey, Ranboo!– can come in here and I can go home, okay?” Connor knows this isn’t where he gets let out. Still, might as well push Sam’s buttons a bit.

“*Connor?* Why is Connor in here?!” Ranboo is just barely visible, looking irritable, shoulders hunched inward.

“It doesn’t matter. Ranboo, please don’t make this harder,” Sam sighs.

“Please, Sam,” Ranboo grows quiet.

“Hey! Ranboo! Might wanna just like, do what he says, dude. If you were gonna get out of this, probably should’ve done that *before* you got, like, halfway into a super secure prison. But don’t you worry, buddy. We’ll get out of here before you know it!” Connor calls cheerfully from his cell door. He recalls the aftermath of the escape. He almost feels bad for lying to the kid, but it’s not like it matters. He’ll be dead for a moment, and then he will be alive again.

* * *

Connor screams. This is a new one. He has reawakened outside of his– Tommy’s?– house and he looks down at himself and sees nothing, no limbs, he doesn’t understand it.

“*WHERE ARE MY ARMS?!*”

Tommy and Techno are speaking to him. He’s friends with Tommy sometimes. He’s friends with Techno sometimes too, he even joined their Syndicate. Maybe this is one of those times.

Connor isn’t so sure.

He’s invisible and he thinks it’s Tommy and Techno’s fault. Oh. They’re not friends. Connor isn’t here by choice. He tries calling for help again. There is no reply. He thinks there should be. He’s a hostage, and he knows he isn’t a hostage forever. Someone gets him out of this. He wishes they’d get him out of this a little sooner. Tommy and Techno are hurting him again. This must be right after the last time. He hopes it is, at least. That Techno and Tommy don’t hurt him multiple times. He considers Tommy his friend. Sometimes. Certainly not now as he begins to drown, let up for air only long enough to stay conscious.

* * *

Connor is relieved to find himself no longer trapped. He can breathe. He can move freely. He’s safe, he thinks. Tommy is still here, but he’s younger now. He’s not hurting him. Connor is new to the server, and Tommy is just showing him around.

“There are a *lot* of assholes on this server, alright?” Tommy says intently. They’re standing on top of the community house, but he didn’t know it was called the community house yet.

“Technoblade,” Connor nods, agreeing, thinking of the man who threatened to put a pickaxe through his kneecaps not long ago with Tommy right beside him.

“Tech– Yeah, Technoblade,” Tommy nods, looking out over the prime path. “All of them. And I think what I need you to do is– Because I know that we’re... we’re friends.”

“Right,” Connor’s reply is automatic. He doesn’t want to think about Tommy laughing as he begged him not to kill him.

“Say we’re friends.”

“We are friends.” Connor doesn’t think he sounds particularly sincere, but he wants to be. Tommy was– or is going to be– the one to damage that. “Ethically.” Connor adds. Friends who don’t torture each other. *Ethically* friends.

Tommy laughs, that sharp cackle of his, "*ethically*? Why did you say that?"

Connor can't explain, so he laughs too. "I'm– I'm Sonic," he says. Eventually people on this server will stop questioning his peculiarities. Until they do, *I'm Sonic* will have to suffice.

Connor follows Tommy down the prime path until he sees Church Prime. He'll frequent its halls eventually, but right now he's supposed to say, "what's this?" And let Tommy show him the church, and the Prime Path, and Connor follows him.

Tommy is a good kid, really. Connor knows that hurting people isn't his nature, even if it still stings.

* * *

Connor is outside the community house again, several renovations down the line. Tommy isn't here this time. Niki is. So is Wilbur. Okay, so this is *way* down the line, then. Wilbur is alive, and he's talking to Niki. That's a change.

"I really want to do one good deed with you."

"One good deed?"

"Something absolutely great–"

Connor approaches the community house.

Wilbur keeps talking, "ignore him. Ignore that guy. Oh god– Hello, Connor."

"Did you guys say a good deed?" Connor doesn't bother noticing Wilbur's lack of enthusiasm. His ghost had been pretty chill, so Connor didn't mind intruding. He wanted to do something helpful. *Doing something* felt like a nice change of pace to whatever motions he had been going through thus far. Wilbur wants to do a good deed as some sort of redemption type deal. Alright, that's fair enough. "No, same, I just served time in jail," Connor explains. "Is how I resolved that issue for myself."

"Okay, in jail–" Wilbur gives him a careful look, pulling Niki aside, "Niki, who is this guy? He's been in *jail*? What the fuck?"

Niki defends Connor. Because they're in the Syndicate together now. That's nice. Connor hopes he gets to actually spend some time with the Syndicate. "It was an accident?" Niki explains.

"What's wrong with jail?" Connor gives Wilbur an unimpressed look. "You don't believe in reformation? Like, what's the deal with you?"

"No, no I believe in reformation!" Wilbur doesn't seem to know what to do with him.

"You've been a ghost too long, the world's different now, buddy."

Wilbur nods, "right, right you can come with us, Connor, just don't touch anything."

Wilbur sounds like he knows what he's talking about, other than his outdated politics on prison reformation. Bla bla summon god, help the sheep, whatever. Connor doesn't care too much about the details, he's just happy to be along for the ride. He's dealt with gods before, he thinks. Or he will. He's not sure if Foolish counts.

Connor doesn't get scared. Maybe a little nervous. The god shows, and Wilbur boxes him in, in a way far too reminiscent of Tommy and Technoblade's actions.

"Do you have a death wish?"

DreamXD is speaking to *him*, he thinks, but Wilbur is handling the talking. As per usual, Connor is tasked with waiting. Maybe he actually can't stand being trapped like this again. Connor grows frantic, pushing against the gold walls Wilbur put around him. He doesn't like being trapped. Connor feels shaky, he vaguely hears Wilbur say, "tell him we'll stop," and mumbles an agreement. He is doing his best not to freak out, keeping his voice level even as he turns around quickly, hoping to be sent to another time soon.

"What if I just killed your friend and your stupid sheep?"

Niki defends him, "uh, that would not be so great." Connor is grateful again to be Syndicate buddies with her. Connor isn't used to having allegiances that care about him and stuff.

"I mean, Connor, how do you feel about that?" Wilbur asks him. Connor stops spinning, turning to face him. "It's easy, right? You could just get killed."

"Uh, yeah, if that's what you guys need, I'm just here to be helpful, y'know?" Connor doesn't mind it. He dies, he goes somewhere else. Maybe it would get him out of this time faster.

Wilbur looks nervous. "I– Connor, I'm not sure about this, actually. I've changed my idea– How do you feel about it?"

Connor tries to remember. He's not sure where he is in the state of things. A little bit ago, he'd said he had two lives, but he doesn't think that makes sense. This far along, he thinks he's died more than once. He isn't sure if he's lived both deaths yet, though. "Well, I mean, I only have like, one life left, so I–"

Then it doesn't matter. It's all gone. He's dead. For a brief moment, he thinks he sees Schlatt–

* * *

And then Connor keeps going.

Connor tries to get his bearings. He tries to remember who is alive and who is dead. *He* is alive, that's something good. Tommy is alive, but he'd been dead before too. Ranboo is alive, he thinks. He thinks Wilbur might be alive? He isn't sure. He knows Schlatt is dead. He usually is. Which sucks as he thought for a second there he was going to get to see him again, but here he is instead. He's living in Ninja's old house again. He's been waiting until he was back, past when Tommy had read his diary– he has a new diary now either way– to make sure Tommy wouldn't see this part. It's nice being able to plan ahead like that.

i don't know when it's gonna happen but i saw when i die.

it isn't all that bad really.

i mean.

i wanted to be helpful.

kinda cool to get killed by god. makes prayer a little awkward though.

kinda was thinking i was immortal, though.

Because it just keeps going, right?

i mean actually i think i am immortal cuz i just said i saw when i die and here im writing about it so.

never mind.

-Friday

Connor thinks it has to be a Friday.

It feels like a Friday.

* * *

Connor is back in Tommy's house, but he's not going to get attacked by Tommy any time soon. Tommy is dead, and this is his house right now. There's even a sign out front, and there are flowers outside of it placed there by Ranboo.

He needs to calm himself, to catch up. He has his diary in his hand.

The last entry:

I hope something happens today.

–Friday

“Me too, my guy...” Connor sighs.

I need a girlfriend

– thursday

“Ha, me too, me too. Which. Makes sense I guess,” Connor turns back one more page.

i miss my friend tommy

he died

got my house back

need food

– wednesday

Okay. So last time he was here, he felt good about Tommy. So, maybe later he won’t feel so messed up about the whole torture thing, right?

Connor’s necromancy powers work a little *too* well, because he’s pretty sure Tommy is supposed to be dead right now, not standing bruised and pale in front of him.

“Oh my god–” Connor panics, shoving him back toward the door, half expecting the guy to try to shove his head under water.
“Begone, ghost!”

Tommy seems as scared of Connor as he is of him, running outside, begging him to stop. Before he runs back in with an axe. “Do not fuckin’ punch me!”

Connor is frantic, but there’s nowhere for him to run, “I’m c-calling the police! I’m calling the police–” They must have police or something, right? He’s going to end up in prison eventually.

Tommy stops, looking an inch away from a breakdown, “n-never fucking punch me–”

Okay. This Tommy isn’t going to hurt him. This Tommy is scared. Connor thinks that means they’re supposed to be friends right now. *Alive* friends. *Ethical* friends.

“Is that actually you?” Connor steps closer and Tommy does not attack him. Progress.

Tommy still looks scared of him. Maybe Connor’s impulse shouldn’t be to sympathize with him considering, y’know, a lot of things, but he doesn’t know why this kid looks so scared of being alive again. Connor feels like being alive is a bit more chill than being dead, generally. That might be because he hasn’t really gotten to spend much time dead.

Tommy is whispering and frantic. He died *bad*. He died in the prison.

Connor thinks of his own time imprisoned. “You know I have been saying we need prison reform on this server.” Connor wonders if Tommy knows his buddy Wilbur has some old fashioned views on prison. It doesn’t matter. Wilbur is dead today. Tommy is alive, and he’s scared.

This is after Tommy has tortured him. Connor doesn’t have any reason to show pity. He kind of wants to anyway.

Tommy is upset that Sam let him die. Wait until he finds out about Ranboo. Or, wait until that thing happens to Ranboo, Connor supposes. Connor will just listen. And then he’ll leave again. He leaves sooner than he thought.

Connor came out to Foolish’s construction site for a reason. He’s guessing he had a reason whenever that destination choice had been made, but right now he isn’t sure. HBomb is here. He’s someone to conspire with, Connor thinks. He has a feeling his intentions here had been conspiratory, even if the details are fuzzy.

Connor tries to piece together his surroundings. The mansion is super unfinished.

Connor has a nuke.

That part is unimportant. He can't remember how he got it, and he's confident he never uses it, he's pretty sure he would've heard about that at some point. So whatever he came here to do, it's something else.

There's a beacon.

Stealing a beacon sounds like something he'd do.

HBomb covers for him, Connor grabs it, and he runs. He doesn't think this is going to end well for him. He thinks he came here for a reason. That reason hits him the same moment Ranboo's sword slices through his back and he feels his whole body burn.

Right. Ranboo kills him.

Connor is down to one life now, and he knows where that will lead, so he returns to the mansion. He knows he won't die again, not here at least.

"Also, guys, I am, uh. Cursing this land with the nuke. I'm cursing it. So, at some point– I curse this place to be destroyed, with my necromancy powers that I have, um, and you guys are all screwed. You will rue this day and you will regret what you have done to me and my forefathers. See you later. Goodbye," Connor turns and leaves. They don't follow.

Connor is pretty sure his curse worked, because sometimes there is a big empty mansion in this spot and no one moves into it, and sometimes that mansion is haunted by Ranboo's ghost, and other times it's under construction until it drives Foolish mad. Or it's before he cursed the land and Connor doesn't see it at all. But that part is less relevant. His curse worked. Just like his necromancy powers work.

* * *

Connor is running. He stares ahead, there is nothing in front of him. What was he doing here? Connor stops. He turns around. He's going the wrong way on the Nether roof again. Or maybe not again, this could be the same as the last time. Connor starts running the other way. He might kill someone. He isn't sure. If he does, he only needs to wait and soon they will be alive again. Just like with the others, with Ranboo, with Tommy, with that Wilbur guy, with himself. He just has to wait.

Connor finally finds his way on the Nether roof, reaching the main portal. And he remembers why he went running off to kill someone. It's because Ranboo killed *him*. Or rather, he was going to. When Connor got there. And instead of killing Ranboo, taking the Beacon and running.

Hm. Connor has maybe a second to wonder about self fulfilling prophecies before he's swept away again.

* * *

Speaking of self fulfilling prophecies. Connor is pretty sure from the way everyone's running around all freaked out, he's pretty sure it's Doomsday, or from the darkened sky, the night before probably.

Connor is on the prime path, he sees his house, the sign over the door confirming it. Tommy is here too. He's standing at that one bench, looking quite serious. Tommy spots him and grimaces, leaving the bench, glancing from the house, the sign over the door currently reading *Connor's House* and considers it for a moment, looking back at him with something almost pitying.

"...hello?" Connor tries.

"Hey, Connor!" Tommy is too loud.

"Tommy, I'm gonna be honest, I don't really know what happened," very true. Connor can't remember the specifics of how they got here. He remembers doomsday, kind of. He doesn't remember the before. Although, he supposes this might fill him in a bit. "I–"

"Hey, Connor!" Tommy interrupts, patronizing and abrasive. "You know how I'm out of exile now?"

"...you are?" Oh. Connor is starting to understand why a bit in the future he isn't in that house anymore.

"I'm out of exile now! And it looks like–"

"Congratulations," Connor means it. Tommy in exile had been the one vicious enough to, y'know, waterboard him and so on.

"*Thank you!*" Tommy sounds almost *too* genuine. "This is my house, Connor, I don't know why you've, uh, *stolen* it."

Ah. He's getting kicked out *now*. Right now. The night before doomsday– he thinks– that isn't ideal.

"Well..." Connor tries to think back. He's mostly going off of context clues at this point. "You *were* evicted."

"Just– One second, just explain this one to me, Connor," Tommy leaves, goes into the house, and returns in armor. He's holding his axe. Connor isn't sure why. He guesses it makes sense, doomsday coming and all. Tommy frowns. "Why're you holding that?"

Connor looks down at his hand. He's holding a lead. He cannot for the life of him remember why. He might not even have lived that part yet. "This is... this is all I have." It's true. His inventory is empty. Gloom is setting in. "I don't... I don't have a place to sleep." Connor turns back toward Ninja's house. It's not a very nice house.

"Tell you what! I'll pitch you a deal, right now. In exchange–" Tommy pauses, mulling something over. "And I am not gonna be the bad guy, ever. In exchange to stay alive, I give you this gapple, and you– and you live in Ninja's house. Pants optional. For the time being." Tommy gestures to the house across the prime path.

Connor already knows he's going to agree. Even if he isn't a fan of the idea. Tommy is right too. *For the time being.* Time being very iffy for Connor, in five minutes, he could have his house back again.

"...I'll take it."

"Yeah? Yeah, we'll be next door neighbors! And in that way, I get to keep my home!"

"Yeah, yeah I'm down with that," Connor goes into the little house. There's not much here. And Connor is pretty sure it never gets any better. "I'd be honored to sleep in Ninja's bed."

"That sounds alright? Okay!" Tommy is quite pushy with this arrangement.

Connor doesn't hold it against him. He knows next time he moves back into Tommy's house, that time will end with Tommy coming home way more messed up than when he left it. He can wait around in Ninja's house for now.

"For what it's worth, Tommy." Tommy is rambling over him, but Connor just keeps talking. Tommy will hear him, or he won't. Little stuff like this doesn't matter, Connor just wants to know he said it. "I don't know what went on today, but, uh, even though you kidnapped me, and I'm still dealing with the trauma of that, you're just a conflicted person, not a bad person." Connor doesn't know how long it has been since Tommy hurt him. For Tommy or for him, but Connor cannot exist in this life able to hold a grudge. Tommy has fallen quiet. "Um. And uh, I hope you find what you're looking for."

"Oh. Thank you, Connor."

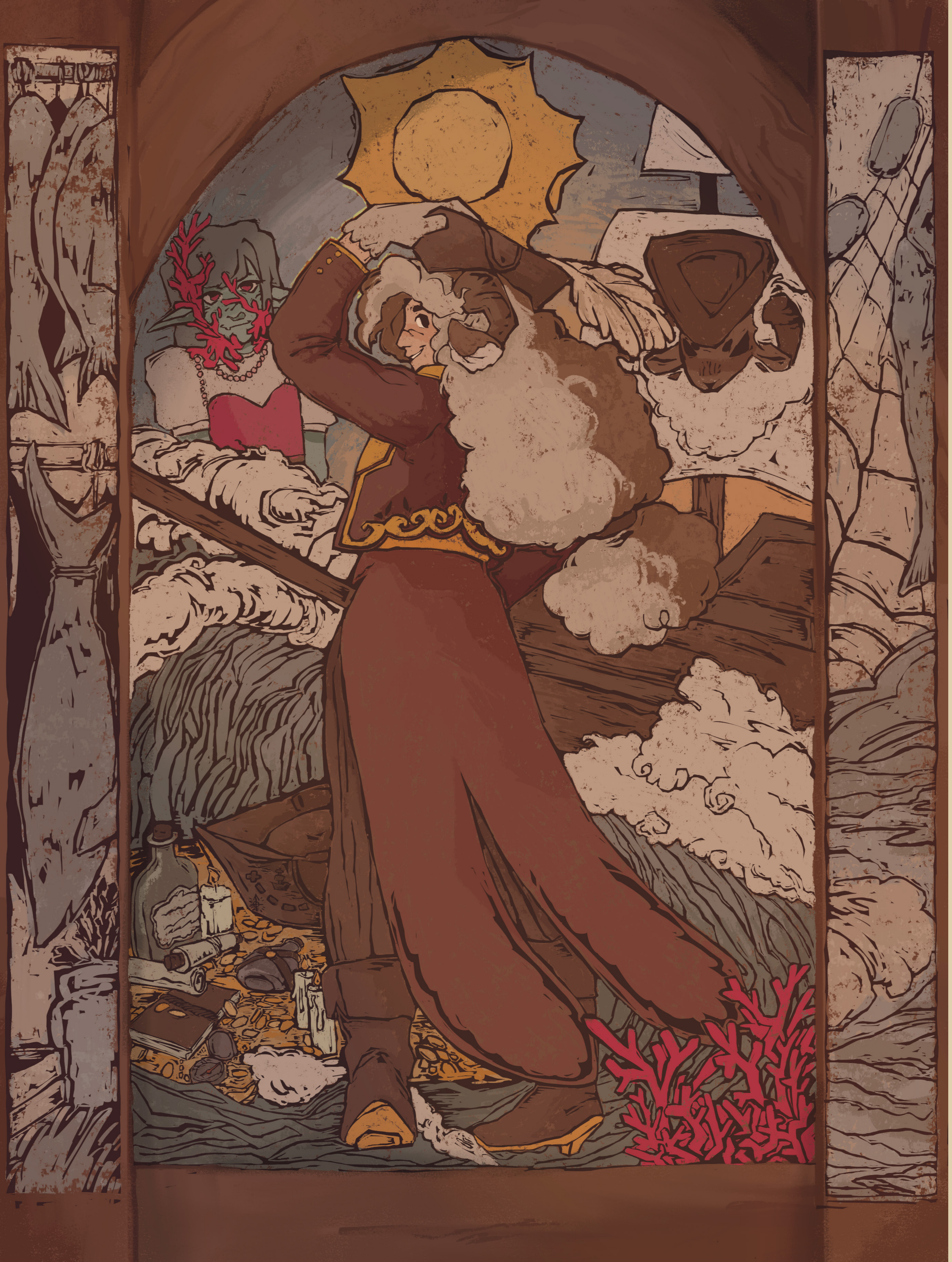
Connor turns back to his empty house. "Actually I need to go get a bed."

And then Connor is alone.

Not *gone*, just alone. Tommy has left. Connor doesn't understand why he's like this. He doesn't often let it get to him, but he feels like he's seen so many people lately, none of them people he had truly been able to rely on. He likes Tommy, he does, but he misses Schlatt. He misses *those* times in his life, and he doesn't know when or how he will get them back.

He feels like he should have run into Schlatt by now. It scares him to think he *hasn't* had Schlatt in his life more than he *has* had him there, to think maybe he's run out of time with his partner.

The way he figures it, from his side of things at least, he'd brought JSchlatt back from the dead, and then he'd been dead again, and then a ghost, and then alive again. Connor must have figured out necromancy to some extent. He didn't feel like he'd done it yet, but he must figure it out eventually. Nothing stayed dead for him. Eventually he'll end up in better times.



The Pirate Queen

THOSE THAT BOASTED to sailing the Seven Seas had likely never sailed far out enough to lose sight of shore, stayed within range of the coddling arms of the land, too afraid of the rough wild embrace of the sea. Because anyone with enough sense in their skull knew there's more than seven seas, that you could be graced with a hundred lifetimes, a ship as unfailing as the tides, and still never see everything that could possibly be seen.

If you're willing to follow them, the currents will lead you to many a strange and wondrous sight, but they always beckoned deeper, *further out,* a siren song urging you to *give in* that many are hesitant to heed. The sea is a capricious mistress, sighs lovingly to fill your sails with great lungfuls of air, guiding you home by her gentle hand, and then shrieks with the maddening glee of squall winds, sinks her claws in as she drags your ship to its watery grave.

She is unknowable, but there are countless tales that speak of her ability to *know*, and while she may be choosy, the sea has her favorites, plucks them off decks and steals them away from their mother's arms, drowns them in her embrace and then breathes in new life. Her children of the surf, with salt caked lungs and hearts that thunder like breaking waves, madness in their smiles and ocean water coursing through their veins, would follow their mother's song to the ends of the earth if she called them.

And if the stories told by old seafarers are to be believed, many did, took their ships and their crew and their lives and sailed right off the edge of worlds, returning to the watery embrace of the mother who loved them so, *who called them home.*

But of course, there are men that sat up in their high towers on their dry land, far away from the siren song of the waves and proclaimed you could sail for forty days and forty nights and still never reach the edge of the world. They said that there *was* no edge, that there wasn't an end to the seas, just a continuation, and sailors looked at them with their soft hands and pale faces and asked them if they knew of the Queen.

"Oh, you mean the gentile queen of our gentile lands. Yes, we know her." They would say, touching at silken hair and delicate spectacles, gold ornamentation on their clothes clacking together in the way wealth is not earned but taken for granted, "She is good and just and soft spoken. Her pen is her sword and she shies away from conflicts. Is that of whom you speak?"

"No. We mean the fierce queen of our fierce sea. And it is clear you do not know her." The sailors would say, pulling on scruffy hair tangled with braids and treasures untold, salt stains on their clothes like a speckled mosaic that spoke of everything they had ever seen, "She is proud and clever and when she calls you listen. Her sword is her sword and she rushes headlong into the fray. *That* is of whom we speak."

So many thousands of different legends circulated in harbors near and far, countless places with so many distinct faces and tides and banners flown, but in nearly every port a ship could make birth, there was the tale of the sea's most favorite child, a daughter who had tasted salt before ever gaining her first sip of air.

The Pirate Queen.

Clustered around fires with bottles and mugs of drink, seamen would speak of how a child was to be born at sea to a mortal mother and father that loved her so, how the parents had prayed and wished and wanted for this child for so long, but that the sea wanted her more.

In a lifetime before, the waves and the tides had seen the mother grow up playing along her shores, saw the spark in her eyes and heard the vivacity of her laugh, had wanted to take her as her own but was denied that right. A too nervous nanny saw the little girl wading out into watery arms that were welcoming her in and snatched her up before the sea could, whispered in her ear all the horrible things that lay in wait at the bottom of the ocean, and the girl turned away in fright.

The child slipped out of the sea's frothy fingers that day, and she howled her fury, brought forth winds that screamed and wailed, drove her waves into the ragged cliffs trying to get to that house sitting snug atop, but the land would not heel to her anger.

She was born here in my meadows along my cliffsides she is not yours to have, the salt soaked rocks intoned as the sea clawed at them futilely, the edge of the land high above seemingly drawn down in a stern countenance, *mind your place know your borders stay where you belong.*

It's said the ensuing storm lasted for four days and four nights. The sea threw everything she had against those cliffs but the land would not buckle, and she had to concede defeat in this matter.

And the little girl, the one she wanted so *terribly*, never strayed too near her shores again, closed her ears to the sea's sepulchral voice, kept out of her reach and so she slunk back to her tides, hid under the peaks of waves and *seethed*.

One daughter may have been lost to her, but the sea would not be denied.

She would get her babe.

Eventually the girl grew into a woman and married a man, lived in a small house with him in their crumbling village, and for reasons that change depending on who tells the tale and who is around to listen, the two decided to seek fortune across the ocean vast and wide, looking for a better life for their child yet to be born.

There isn't anyone alive still to refute this, but the way the legend goes, those parents set foot on that ship, took their feet off dry land for a mere second and nearly stumbled as the deck heaved, a great bubble of a wave like the first maddening laugh of drunken *victory* rocking the entire ship.

And from deep down in the dark and the silent, the sea began to churn, great snarling whips of roiling tides that tore through the undercurrent at the bottom of the world, and surging towards the surface with all the joyous elation of a new dawn, the sea smiled an abyssal void of a grin and began to sing.

It was time. *Finally*, she would get what she wanted.

She sung up a gale of storms that drug the waves up as high mountains, caps of them snow peaked with seafoam as they came crashing down, razor sharp winds slicing the sails to ribbons, cutting ropes and lacerating skin, and through it all the sea sang her song, arms opening up wide to welcome that ship and all its inhabitants to their watery grave, *to welcome her new daughter home.*

The child was born at the bottom of the ocean, saw her own breath leave her tiny body before she ever saw a speck of light, but the ocean rushed in greedy, cooed sweetly and rocked her gently. *You are my child and you are my love,* the tides sighed, raked through chestnut waves and left seafoam behind, *I am with you every step of the way,* the currents exhaled, touching at eyelids that fluttered open, bearing eyes green and hypnotic, *you are mine and I am yours until the end of dawn until the stop of time.*

The first village said they found her swaddled in seaweed hidden amongst the rocks of the jetty, that the child refused any liquids unless it was tinged with salt, that her cries brought forth terrible storms and her delighted coos sweetened the sea into rocking the ships in gentle lullaby.

Her eyes were always too intelligent and aware for something so small, unnerved the men of land but brought seamen to a standstill, for they recognized that shade of green, knew it to be the same one as the bright flash that could sometimes be seen at sunset, after someone had made the Crossing.

“*Take her.*” The village people would urge, desperate to be rid of this omen they could not understand, but seafolk knew better, shook their heads and stepped back, “Tis not our place, not our call. The tides left her here for a reason, she has to make her own way.”

And so she did.

The child was an odd thing and the men of land weren’t sure what to do with her, tried to teach the babe the ways gentile women behaved, but she would not heed, scrabbled over the black rocks of the jetty and clawed open oysters with her bare hands. The rough razor shells would cut her hands and draw forth bright violent blood, but the sea kissed away her hurts, lovingly ran fingers over hers and mended what had been torn.

“You must be careful child. Be gentle and learn patience.” The fishmongers would scold her after she’d come scuttling back to the docks, pockets filled with pearls and other gifts she’d pluck from the surf, but she always rolled her stellar green eyes, didn’t see what good patience was when there was so much to explore.

As the child grew, so did her love of the sea, and the people that raised her on land could not control her any more than they could stop the dark horns that sprouted up and began to curl past her hair. She was wild and reckless and would not take no for an answer, but she loved so very fiercely, had a heart as wide and thunderous as the surf breaking against the shoreline.

“You must be quiet girl. Sit down and learn your place.” The teachers would chastise her after she was marched off the play yard, knees scuffed and specks of blood on her knuckles, but she always scoffed and shook her mane of hair back, refused to sit down while there were others who struggled to stand up for themselves.

The years wore on and she gained as many followers as she gained adversaries, and as their numbers grew, challenges began to come few and far between, and that’s when she learned that while there was strength to be had in standing on your own, there was so much more strength to be found in standing together. A ship worthy to sail through cost gold the likes of which she had never seen, and so for a long while, she and her people would chafe under a banner that was not her own.

“You best be mindin’ yer tongue lass. Shut up and learn the way of things.” Captains would tell her when she wouldn’t heed the orders that had been given to her, a maelstrom in her heart and fury in her eyes because she would not take up sword against the guiltless, and she started to garner a reputation as an ill omen, for ship after ship she sailed on was soon lost to the depths.

It’s unclear how many shipwrecks she survived, and by all accounts of anyone who’s ever told the tale, she shouldn’t have lived beyond any one of them, but she did. This girl now woman, the child conceived of mortals but born into the salt spray, refused to give up, would struggle to the surface and breach through the stormy seas gasping for air like she had as a babe, the frenetic drumming of the tides in her heart keeping her going, always chasing after that new horizon.

Some say it was her tenacity that eventually won her enough gold to buy a ship of her own, a beautiful thing with deep red brown planks and cloud white sails, or even that she stole it, went with sword and crossbow and violence and took what she felt like she was owed, or maybe it was her silvered tongue, the sway she had over the spoken word as alluring and hypnotic as the call of the sea, swayed an entire crew into bending the knee.

But none of these are the truth.

It wasn't gold, it wasn't force, it wasn't trickery.

It was the storm alive in her bones.

It was the lightning in her eyes and the maddening curl of hurricane winds hiding against the corners of her smile, everything about her that marked her as special. That great depthless heart that could love as much as it could hate, drew you in like a riptide, the voice that cracked like cannons discharging, the one that when it spoke you *listened*, and it's not such a hard thing to understand then, that others saw her, understood who she was, *saw what she could be*, and stepped aside, doffed their hats and said, "Where you lead, we will follow."

And they did, chased after the long tails of her coat as she went rushing headlong into the fray, ducked through dense jungles in the pursuit of legends and treasures outside your wildest dreams. Never was there a crew so unflinchingly loyal as the one that served her, offered their swords and their lives to her banner, weathered every squall, enjoyed every sunrise, followed every command without fail.

They loved her and they also feared her, but in the way true sailors love and fear the sea, know its majesty and might, are drawn to it like a tether in their hearts, but with the understanding that this place is wild and untamable and they wouldn't have it any other way.

"Why do you follow me?" Their captain had asked once at the start, standing unsure behind the helm of the ship that had just been relinquished to her for what, in her mind, was seemingly no good reason, and they stared at her with her flashing eyes and storm wind smile and great bleeding heart and said, "We admire you, and you care for us. We respect you, and you trust us. Because we love the sea and you're a part of her."

And the captain knew then how deeply she was loved for loving so strongly in return and she took her rightful place behind the wheel, ran her hands along gilded spokes and understood she was where she belonged.

That ship with the deep brown red planks and the cloud white sails, manned by a crew more unfailing than the tides, captained by a woman who led them unwaveringly, sailed for many years and explored and discovered all the many places in the world.

Fishermen on their little bobbing boats told tales of them fighting sea serpents larger than the grandest ship, said that the captain and her crew slew the beasts with swords made of lightning and cannons crafted from thunder, that every time you see a storm at sea, it's really the crew taking on another behemoth.

Privateers spun yarns in old salt stained taverns about how they'd seen the ship being guided through rough waters by mermaids, said that the captain couldn't drown and was taken to that undersea kingdom, that the gold capping her horns and hanging down from her long ears was mined at the bottom of the ocean floor.

Ensigns conscripted aboard naval vessels whispered to keep your eyes peeled for the sea ram insignia carved into docks and harbor posts, said that's where the captain comes to look for new crewmates, that if you're noble and good and stalwart in your convictions, she might invite you aboard, spirit you away with her on an adventure outside of your wildest dreams.

Nearly every place that had a shore the ocean waves kissed, also had a story about the captain with curling horns and salt streaked hair, told tales about that beautiful ship with the gilt rigging and shiny gunports, said that it had gone and sailed and discovered everything it could across the entire ocean.

They said the captain and her crew had sailed to the edge of the world, and that one day, after she realized there was nothing new to be seen, they sailed right over the side.

It was a rumor, largely a myth, but there were whispers of what awaited a sailor if they had the stomach to take the plunge, make the Crossing, alleged that the sea rewarded her fearless faithful quite handsomely.

“A whole new sky, a whole new ocean, *a whole new life.*” Seamen slurred dreamily as they watched the sun set, eyes peeled for that electric crack of green, the one that heralded a soul’s departure from this world but not the end of a life, not a book closing but merely a page turning.

A new story waiting to unfold.

“Such a thing isn’t possible. Such a thing isn’t feasible. *Such a thing doesn’t exist.*” Scholars sighed exasperated as they fiddled with all their little tools and gizmos, heads bent to their books, had never seen crests of waves beckon like long fingers nor heard squall winds that rung with delighted laughter.

They had never seen a captain with curling ram horns surface after hours spent beneath the waves, had never witnessed storm clouds moving with her inhales, had never felt the touch of the ocean and knew it to be the same as the hands that patched up wounds and passed around drinks and held on so tightly.

They had never seen anything that there was to see and they never would, for adventure doesn’t just come to you, it has to be sought out, and every person that took the first step off dry land, planted their feet on the swaying deck of a ship and gave themselves over entirely to the mercy of the sea, they knew.

Adventure was out there if only you knew where to look.

She might never have existed, this captain of legend with a ship as

beautiful as a clear morn, but who’s to say that she *didn’t*.

Truth becomes story, story becomes legend, and legends never die.

They said the Pirate Queen, who was of the sea and loved by it so dearly, sailed over the edge of the world one day, that what she was ceased to be until her mother gifted for her new eyes to see with, new hands to haul rope, and set to beating life a new heart that thundered as madly as ever before.

They said she made the Crossing so many times, it became commonplace for any babe born with green eyes to be called seaborne, that her legend spread to every corner of the globe and then kept going, following her into the next life and every life after.

They said that even now, the cycle continues, that the body may be different but the soul remains the same, and every life she lived was richer for it, that no matter how many times she breathed air again for the first time, she never stopped caring as fiercely as the tides cared for her.

And for everyone that was ever told this tale, whoever bothered to stop and *listen*, thought they knew her, *felt like they might be her*, they all asked the same question.

“How many? How many times did the Pirate Queen sail off the edge of the world?” They would ask, hushed and awed where they clustered around fires with bottles and mugs of drink, and in a hundred different tongues, in a thousand different languages spoken from a myriad of faces, the answer was always the same.

“How many stars are there in the night’s sky?”

The President in the Mirror & Other Ghost Stories

PREFACE

IN AESCHYLUS' *The Oresteia*, we find the sorrowful line, "This was always going to happen. She's been dead since the beginning." It is a line I have never quite forgotten in all my years, and perhaps that is what led me to create this collection, curious thing that it is.

Ghost stories are as old as anything. They've been around longer than you or me or anyone else. Much like the fairytales of old, many of them are viewed as cliched, hackneyed, boring—or worse, are forgotten. That's never sat right with me, the forgetting. In a sense, everything is a ghost story. Every character has been dead since the beginning. Generally speaking, they were never alive to begin with, if we assume they were only ever characters. All characters are ghosts, fates predetermined, haunting their stories.

So how do we start telling this story, you might ask? We could begin, of course, with *it was a dark and stormy night*, but the weather hardly matters to a ghost. *Scratch that,* you say. Perhaps something equally familiar: *once upon a time*.

But it would be inaccurate to begin this story, or any of them, with something so cliched as *once upon a time*. Why? Because everything here is a ghost story, as I said, and all things die eventually. What is anything but a ghost waiting to happen? *Ghost* is the future tense of everything.

To tell a ghost story is to tell the story of everything, in a sense, and so the word *once* will never do.

If you'll allow me to digress further, to say *once* is perhaps in further error because the ghost is intended to be all of us, in a way. What is more of a blank slate than death, that great equalizer? *We*, the reader, (the teller, the writer) are the ghost. We are all ghost stories waiting to be told. In most ghost stories—and so in these I have collected from our history—the identity of the ghost is often rendered unimportant in the story as a whole. This is because ghosts, like ghost stories, are for the living rather than the dead. When you (living), say to me (also living), *tell me a ghost story*, I am a living being telling another living being the story of something dead that often doesn't know it's dead. The story itself is not a ghost. The ghost is not telling the story. The ghost, I've noticed, is never the one telling the story, and never will be, not until I myself have died and someone in the future is reading this, reading these words from someone dead. But they will still be living. The story will be, too. Stories are hard things to kill, I've learned.

All this to say: beginning with once is not quite right, but it will have to do until we discover the right words, until we make better ones, because who ever heard of a ghost story that begins with *infinitely?*

Why, you ask, go through all this trouble, all these words, for a ghost story? For *these* ghost stories?

We'll get to that soon enough. This is hardly our opening act, after all; merely the dimming of lights and the rising of the curtain. Lend me your eyes, your ears, your hearts, and I will tell you the stories of the hauntings of our server.

* * *

I. The President in the Mirror

Once, there was a president. Like many presidents, he was not a bad president, and unlike many others, he was loved. We do not think of it as being such a rare and wonderful thing, to be loved, and perhaps in doing so we take it for granted. A ghost is just part of that love, after all—but I am getting ahead of myself.

Once, there was a president. He was neither bad nor good, neither saint nor tyrant. He was, like all of us, simply a man, and a bit of a troubled one at that. In his quest to be good—or what he thought to be good—he threw himself into his work, spending late nights in his office, head buried in his hands over paperwork and policy. I do not know if he cried, for now nothing beside remains or remembers to tell me so, but if I were to imagine, I would think that perhaps he did. I know I would. Wouldn't we all?

The president drew away and away and away, becoming so buried in his work that nobody ever saw him anymore. Son, brother, friend, comrade—not one of them seemed able to reach him. He didn't eat. He wouldn't sleep. Things went on this way until the president was scarcely more than a ghost.

And then one day, the president disappeared.

(It is not important how this happened. Death never seems to be the most important part in a ghost story. Suffice it to say, he did not die a president, was not assassinated by an enemy of any kind—but he did not die hated, either.)

One day he was there and the next he was not, and life, as it so often does, went on. Time went by, and his nation, though no longer his, kept living. There were other presidents because people love leaders and the sense of security they bring.

There came a new president, younger than most, but wise beyond his years. Every morning, he would look in the mirror, straightening his tie and smoothing his hair, making sure he was presentable, as any leader should be. One day, he looked into the mirror and found someone else looking back at him.

It was the old president, smiling his old smile, eyes crinkled just so. The old president whom everyone missed but no one spoke of, because grief is a funny thing, and often refusing to speak of tragedy feels like the most bearable thing of all. (The thing is: it's not. It is nothing more than a short-term solution. Denial can only go so far, and perhaps it is kinder to reminisce about the good times and commiserate about the bad than it is to hide away from the truth. That, I suppose, is why we tell ghost stories.)

So, picture this: the new president, doing his best to lead a nation, which is no easy task, standing before a mirror and facing the memory of everything he must live up to. Father, brother, leader, friend—how can anyone hope to follow such an act? The president in the mirror reminded the president before it of everything he could never be.

He turned away and went about his day. If his tie lay crooked, no one mentioned it.

It went on like this for a time. Sometimes, the ghost would be in the mirror when the new president looked. Sometimes he wouldn't. There seemed no rhyme or reason for it, but since when has death ever been anything but senseless? So it is with ghosts. As time went on, he was there more than he was not, just a dead-eyed thing, smiling, confident, preserved forever like a taxidermied animal, a faded photograph, a mirror reflecting back on itself into eternity. The image remained the same, smiling and stoic, but the more he looked, the more the new president noticed the hollowness of his cheeks, the bags beneath his eyes, the strain of the smile, the quiet desperation in the seemingly calm gaze. He often wondered how anyone had missed it before. (Sometimes, though he wished he wouldn't, he sometimes found himself wondering if no one had bothered to look in the first place.)

Eventually, he stopped looking. His role in this story ends here, with this: with the choice to stop seeing.

As for the president in the mirror, well, maybe he's still there, unblinking, smiling forever. It is said that if you stand in a darkened room, holding a bottle of dandelion wine and a spool of red thread, and whisper his name three times into the blank mirror, he will appear with his gaunt cheeks and eternal smile.

(But here is a secret: it doesn't matter if that's true, because no one remembers his name. What use is a memory repeating when the context is gone? It's as good as forgotten when those who knew it have passed. Darling, even ghosts die—whatever do you think forgetting is?)

Once there was a president who refused to let go, and in a way, that's worse than death could ever be.

II. The Whispering Ravine

As told around campfires late, late at night in the depths of summer.

Gather 'round children, I'll set you a scene, tell a tale of a madman and his lonely ravine...

Somewhere out there in the dark and the wilds, there is a ravine. I won't tell you where, I won't tell you when, but the floors are dusty and the passages long and dark and twisting. Once, it was lit by lanterns, but now they have all fallen from their chains, metal rusted, grimy glass shattering across the rocky pathways. Most curious of all, there are thousands and thousands of wooden buttons lining the walls, and not one single one has rotted away.

It is dark and dank and there are no rails on the stairs. Many a visitor have slipped and fallen to their death and taken their place among the whisperers. This ravine, you see, is one full of ghosts, one chief among them.

You should never go there hoping to see a ghost—you should never go there at all, lest the twisting passages swallow you up until you are nothing more than another ghost—because it is not a place of *seeing*, not in the slightest. You will not see shadows ducking around corners, nor bloody handprints appearing on the buttons. But in this ravine, in the dark and the quiet, you will hear. Oh, you will hear.

[The TELLER should stomp their feet for the footsteps.]

There—footsteps spiraling past you down the slick steps of the staircase as a cold breeze brushes you by. Be careful that you don't slip, now.

[The TELLER should shift to and fro in their seat for the walkways.]

The rickety walkways that haven't already collapsed in rotting heaps creak and groan as though someone is walking on them. There's nobody there.

[The TELLER should click a pen or tap two sticks together for the buttons.]

The buttons *click-click-click* as you pass. Why fill a ravine with buttons that do nothing at all?

The ravine is a chorus of noises—indistinct whispers, hoarse shouts, wretched sobs. In one room, tucked far away from the rest, the frantic scribbling of a pen on paper comes and goes, interspersed with muffled sobs. Sometimes, if you listen carefully, you can hear soft humming, almost cheerful.

[The TELLER should close their eyes and hum a few bars, soft and eerie, before opening them again.]

It is always accompanied by the sharp smell of gunpowder.

Nobody knows who haunts the ravine, not exactly. They just say it's a madman, someone who lived down there in the dark and the damp and the echoes so long that he lost his way. That it drove him to the edge—of what, they can't say. Nobody knows what happened to him. Maybe he tripped down the stairs and broke his neck. Maybe he walked on and on into the darkness and was never seen again. Maybe part of it collapsed on top of him.

Whatever it was, some part of him is still there, echoing still in the depths of the whispering ravine.

III. Clattering Bones

A long time ago, there lived a man who died under terrible circumstances. The circumstances aren't important, at least not to this story—they were rather important to the man—for as I've said, death is not the important part, but merely another step in the story.

There was a man and he died, and nobody buried him, and *that* is the important part. Perhaps no one buried him because they couldn't find his body. Perhaps, in some great echoing of *Antigone*, it was forbidden. Perhaps it was because he was hated, or maybe just that he was loved too much, who can say. Certainly not you or me. The important part is that there were no rites said over his body, no bells rung or ribbons tied around his corpse's wrists, nothing to ward away darkness or guide him on his way to the afterlife, and Prime knows the consequences of the dead laid improperly to rest.

In the absence of rest and ritual, something *grew*. The spirit, still tethered to its body in the earthly plane, grew restless. The man could not make his way to the afterlife, not when his body remained unattended to, without a single prayer uttered. He clawed and he chewed, and he ate his way out of what the Greeks called Asphodel, tore his way back into the body, swallowing the unbeating heart he had left behind whole and bloody in one great and terrible gulp.

Skin grey from death and ash, he rose from the rubble of his ruined home, and then he walked. He was a dead body, moving; a taxidermied animal with newly articulated limbs; Lazarus given new life. What is death, after all, but a new state of being?

He was not whole, not any longer, driven-half mad by the inability to move on and find peace, haunted by things he could not recall. He could not remember his purpose, his reason for *being*. Given no rites, no grave, no rest—the man became a dead thing, unburied. What else could he do but rot?

His loved ones wept at the sight of him, with his sunken cheeks and bloodied teeth and empty eyes. (Some of them screamed. Some of them fled at the sight of a smile full of maggots. Bodies are always best buried, you know. People can't stand to see the decay.)

He walked and he walked until his body rotted clean away, skin and flesh and sinew and all. When his legs gave out, he started crawling, dragging himself onwards in hopes of finding whatever he was supposed to be looking for—or perhaps a grave to lie in. When his arms rotted away, he wriggled forward like one of the maggots who consumed him. He wormed and he writhed, and he wriggled his way right off a cliff into a lake in a deep canyon, and was never seen again.

The next time you go out to swim in the old quarry, tilt your head. Listen carefully. Perhaps, just perhaps, you will hear a rattling like old ivory dice. They say those are his bones, still restless, still unburied, clattering onwards in search of something unknown.

Bury your dead, say the prayers and twine satin ribbons of silver bells around their wrists. Sever the spirits from the bodies and guide them into their next life. Treat the dead with respect—don't leave them to rot. Give them rest, or else the sound of clattering bones will be all you hear—until *you* die, too.

IV. Little Lost Sheep

A man was out looking for his sheep when he noticed the sky had gone dark with rainclouds. No one ever wants to be caught in the rain, and he thought about going home, but he hadn't yet found his sheep, and he was terribly worried about it. As thunder growled overhead, the man forged onwards.

In another few minutes, it began to sprinkle, and then suddenly to pour. The rain was freezing cold, unbearably cold, so he ducked under an overhang to wait out the storm, still calling for his sheep all the while.

Soon, someone else came by, tucked under a great black umbrella.

"Hello," called the man. "I'm looking for my sheep, but the rain is too cold. Have you seen it? Can you help me?"

"I'm sorry," replied the stranger, flinching away from splattering raindrops all around, "but I need to get out of the rain. It's so cold it almost burns."

And then he hurried onwards, leaving the man behind under the overhang.

More time passed, and the man grew impatient. He took a few cautious steps out into the rain, but it came down so fiercely that the man felt as though it pierced him to his very bones. He huddled under a tree to wait. After a while, another stranger jogged by in the spray.

"Wait!" called the man, and the jogger stalled, jogging in place. "I'm looking for my sheep, but it's raining so hard it hurts. Can you help me?"

"I haven't seen any sheep," the jogger replied, shrugging. "Maybe you should try running! If you run fast enough, surely you can dodge the raindrops. That's what I do!"

And he dashed away into the rain. The man, terribly worried about his little lost sheep, decided to give it a try. He charged out into the rain as fast as he could, but there came a great gust of wind that drove him back under the tree before the raindrops could even reach him. Dejected, the man sat down under the tree and began to sob. Would he never find his pet?

The storm raged on. A long while later, a third stranger came by, seemingly unaffected by the deluge and the wind.

"Please!" called the man. "Please wait! I'm looking for my sheep, but the wind is too strong. Can you help me?"

The stranger let out a braying laugh in the man's face.

"That's pretty pathetic," he snorted. "*The wind's too strong!* Maybe you're not strong enough, huh? Look at me!" He tilted his head back and spread his arms wide, tie flapping in the wind. "The wind's got nothing on me! I'll ram my way through it if I have to! Try not being such a pansy. It's just a little rain. It can't hurt you. Get over yourself if you want to find your pet."

And he walked away into the gloom, still laughing.

Now desperate and humiliated, the man set his jaw and decided if no one would help him, he would have to help himself. He was going to find his sheep, and no storm would stop him.

He squared his shoulders and took three great steps out into the rain. The cold burned terribly and the rain pelted fiercely and the wind howled ferociously, but the man kept going, walking out into the rain undeterred.

In only a few minutes, with nary a noise, he melted clean away.

He was a ghost, you see, and everyone knows ghosts melt in the rain.

He never did find the sheep.

V. One Last Stop

I have one last ghost story to tell you. It is not a very long one. Sometimes, ghost stories don't need to be long at all. Perhaps the shortest ghost story of all is this: *I'll be back,* or this: *I miss you,* or this: *please come back*, or this: *I love you,* or even just this: *stay*. All you need is something to be haunted and something to haunt. Who ever said death had to be a part of the equation?

Once, there was a train station. Not always, not this time. *Once*. There was a train station, once, and it was empty, abandoned, missing tiles from the walls, lights long burned out overhead. There was a station, and in it sat a man or maybe a ghost or maybe they were the same all along. We are all ghost stories at the end of the day.

The man sat in the station, which was empty, save for him. It had not always been this way, but sometimes he feared it would be that way forever after.

(Listen—here is a ghost. He sits and he waits to be remembered. He sits and waits for a train that will never come. He sits and waits for rest.)

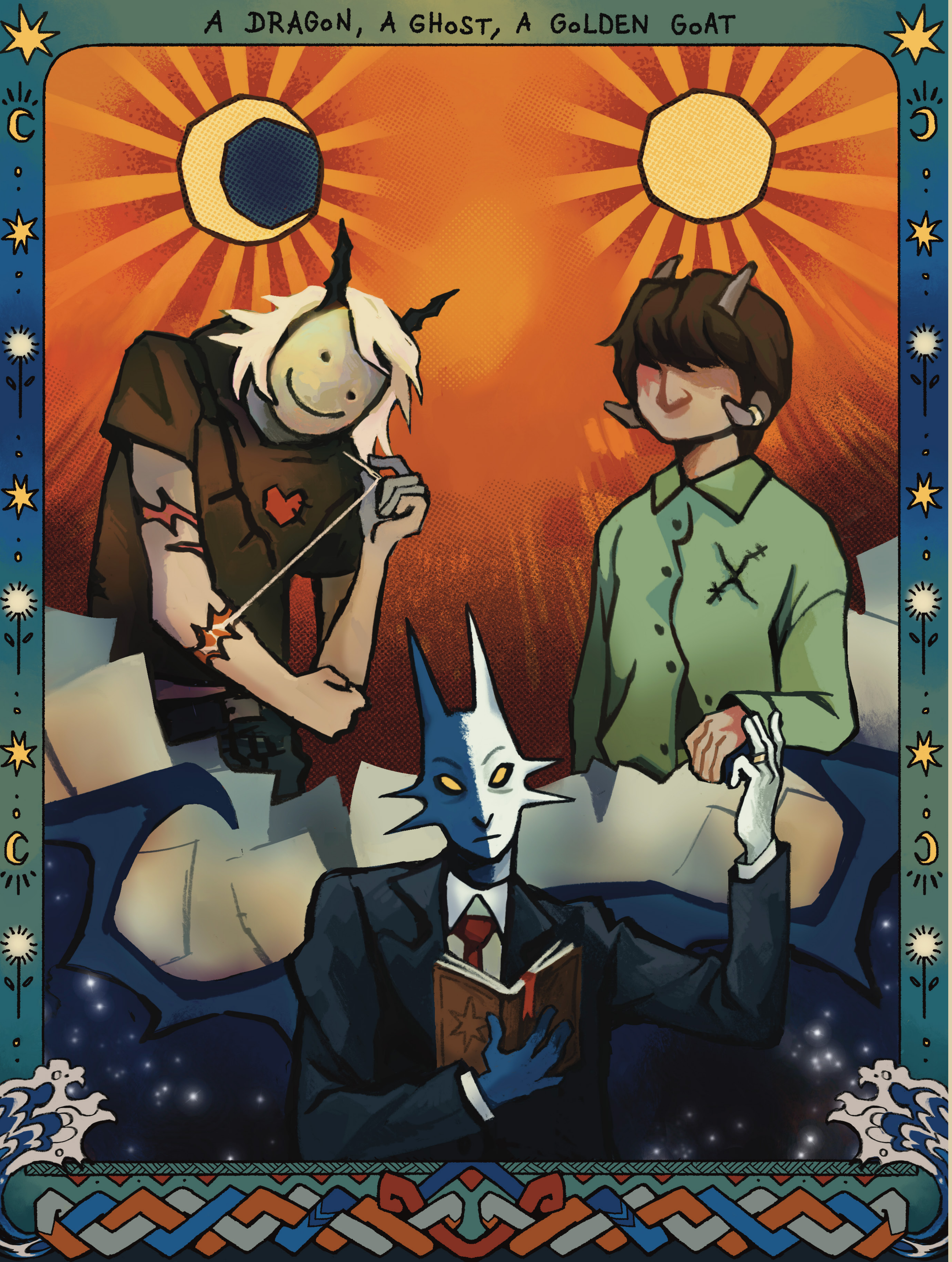
There was darkness. There was silence. There was a sound at the end of the tunnel.

And god said *let there be light,* after all. (And the universe said…)

* * *

This story is incomplete. All ghost stories are. Ghosts are all about unfinished business, you know. Whatever way you spin it—the train station is real and grown over with plants, reclaimed by nature and no longer dead and gutted and smelling of suffering; the train station is empty and the man has gone home; there was never a ghost in the train station to begin with; and so on—this story has not ended, or perhaps it has no end.

So why tell it? Why tell any of them, these ghost stories, collecting them from around campfires and within old diaries and passed down mouth to ear to mouth again through the years? (Don't you remember what I said when we started? Isn't remembering the entire point?) *Love,* that's why. Because of the love. That's all any of us are, in the end.


A DRAGON, A GHOST, A GOLDEN GOAT

A Dragon, A Ghost, A Golden Goat

IN THE BEGINNING, there was the Overworld, the Nether, and the End.

Nestled in the bosom of the End, at the heart of the scattered islands and chorus forests, laid the legacy of the last queen. Guarded by the remnants of her subjects, it remained in the dark, undisturbed for unknowable time.

Then came the dreamer, the man hunted. Clad in green and white, as a thief in the ever-night of the End, the Dream took a legacy that did not belong to him.

THE END.

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> /setblock ~ ~ ~ dragon_egg[alive]
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> Error! ‘alive’ tag not recognized.
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THE END.

In the beginning, there was only the Overworld and the Nether.

There was no end, there was no out, no exit, no starting over. The way was shut, the portals were closed, and the strongholds were buried. The only things he could not stop, could not hide, were the endermen.

And the only thing that he kept for himself, in a desperate, blind hope, was the egg.

THE END.

It started like this:

Ranboo’s first memory of the world was heat. Awful, itching heat. The kind that makes you feel like your insides are swelling up like a corpse, and your outsides can barely keep them in. All he remembered was the heat that never seemed to abate, never seemed to ebb, and the terrible cacophony of roiling and boiling.

At first, there had been voices that accompanied the sound. He knew that in his heart, but could never call the sound of them to mind. What were the words? And what had they sounded like? Did it matter? It seemed to him that it did. If only he had been awake then.

The Enderking was born too many years too late, escaping from the false-nest that he had been buried in, with the language of the enderman as his mother tongue. The first thing he remembered smelling were the piles of dead spruce needles, gently fallen in overlapping circles around their mother trees. The first thing he remembered seeing was the night sky above him, the glittering stars like obsidian. The first thing he remembered hearing was the endermen.

Ranboo crawled out of a hell only to realize he should have stayed put.

By day he was a man among the people. He stood by them as they watched an entire plane crumble apart, shattered under the heel of conflict. As their struggles for power and fleeting attempts at peace inevitably burned out or ground them down, Ranboo often took solace in isolation. In the early days, it was the panic room, his first attempt at recreating the anhedonic, suffocating feeling of the origin place—the nest that someone had made for him.

He still wasn’t quite sure if the voice he had heard in the panic room had been of his imagination, or if something had snapped into place. Like a revelation, or a recognition. Any other person—he thought—would have stepped up by now, and tried to lay some kind of claim on him. Not necessarily as an object or a creature to be controlled, but as an ally, as a son, as a brother. They would have known him by sight or by sound, they would have known how they had shaped his beginning, a late birthing directly into a baptism of fire, but no one had come for him.

It made sense. But then it didn’t.

Dream always appeared eyes-first—a sensation. It was the shiver of a feeling, the knowledge that he was being watched, that warned Ranboo when he stood alone on the raised boardwalks of L’Manberg. The rest of the man usually followed, if Ranboo trusted his senses.

In crowds, or in the daytime, it was harder to spot him, but Dream’s predilection with being impenetrable at all times was a fault perhaps, because it was the quiet clinking of enchanted netherite plates that gave him away. The shiver, the sound, and then when Ranboo turned to look—there he went, disappearing over the far side of a gable, or crossing through the shadow of a building.

Ranboo had never caught him standing still, unless he was putting on airs for a crowd. More often than not, he was going somewhere. And he didn’t walk, not like a person anyway. He stalked, like a pale leopard across the valley; head forward, back straight, grip tight on his sword and shield, each step carefully calculated, and the pace carefully chosen. He maintained the appearance of a wild animal walking through a cage that he had already broken out of. It was strange to watch him, like looking at a negative or the burned afterimage of something familiar but alien.

And he was always hale. Even after conflict, his armor was spick and span and his eyes were bright with clarity. He smelled like hard work, like leather and oil and grass. Before things went downhill, he often had a tinge of animal smell about him too. Not anymore.

At night, he was different. Or rather, he was the same, just a man in different circumstances. And that was true of Ranboo too, as his mind started to race, clamoring to break out of its own confines. Like a dog scrambling over the walls of a racetrack, Ranboo stumbled into the midnight starlight, wounded and confused. They had a ritual for their meetings, one that he could never quite remember until after it was completed, because his mind was still knitting together the memories he had set aside.

“Before we came here, this is what we would do during manhunts.” Dream muttered, mumbled, said like he was tossing scraps out to a feral thing. “Call a truce for a night, go out into the middle of nowhere to make a campfire and talk. If you weren’t already gone by morning, you were fair game.”

"Manhunts." Ranboo considered him, still feeling the thread of his memories. "Are you a man?"

That was part of the ritual too. Sometimes Dream answered, this time he had not. He watched the man change, unwinding like the night sky into an aurora. His terrifying visage was set aside, helmet pulled free with no palpable relief, and set on the ground. The flames in their small campfire started to climb in earnest, revealing what even the sun couldn't find.

Long eyelashes silhouetted against freckled skin, and a veritable rainbow of scars. One particularly vile one looked like a close call with a blade, pigmented and jagged just under his eye. Dream set aside some of his armor, just enough that he could wrestle with his injuries.

Dream tried to impress upon him what had been taken, armor glinting and his sharp features highlighted by firelight, but Ranboo more than anything could see a dead man walking. It was strange what the night revealed; the reason for his callous indifference. The whole picture came into sharp focus, because there was Dream as he told Ranboo to never let his enemies see him weak, and he said the words through his teeth, still armed and armored. He lectured about strength and weakness, all while he tried to re-stitch the same wound he had been stitching for three nights, an old wound that refused to heal because its keeper couldn't allow himself the indignity of limping, or wearing a sling, or going home and simply resting.

He looked like the last of the Fates, with a needle pinched between his thumb and his forefinger, thread woven around his pinkie like something forgotten, and then he grasped for a pair of shears and cut the thread in two.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Ranboo had asked once, in between Dream's death throes—his lecturing—when everything had fallen silent.

Dream had picked up his heavy shield, just moments after dumping a potion onto a gruesome bruise that spiderwebbed up his entire shield arm. There was a certain look in his eyes that he got when he said something that he was sure Ranboo would forget. His face blank, and unfeeling, he lied, "You get used to it."

Ranboo considered what it meant that he stood here, the only—or one of the few—to see Dream's true form as a corpse errant. How could you hate a man like that? Dream lived his life as a keep. The castle halls were empty, him alone claiming the title of king. He was the last man standing, the last one with the keys, but all he cared about was maintaining his walls and keeping himself armed to the teeth. Could Ranboo open his mouth and speak anything other than the truth? That the man who brought him into this plane had many faults, but he wasn't undeserving of... something.

By morning the feeling escaped him, fleeing at the sight of the sun and leaving him strange and alone all day.

What do you call the creature that dies every dawn and is reborn in the morning? Does it have a name?

By night, Ranboo was a homebody. He liked the look of Snowchester when it was dark. Away from the lights of Spawn, covered in a blanket of frost. It was ice that crept into the abandoned places, rather than dust or cobwebs, and it was crawling over the sill and through the corners of window panes. It split wooden skirting on the empty houses, shattered stone foundations, and raced across the beaches, trying to freeze the vast ocean to no avail. The beachhead was his favorite place, far and away.

At dusk, the world stopped for a little while, and so did Ranboo. He would stand at the end of the world, for an hour or two—or three—and watch the stars come out. As the sky turned dark, the first light on the glassy mirror surface of the ice was the brilliant yellow from an open, distant window. Somewhere, high above the waterline, was Tubbo.

The manor where the three of them lived tended to be a little dark, overly spooky, but when the lanterns were lit and the candlesticks were set on the sills, the place looked like the sun in the oppressive darkness of night—especially when Ranboo looked at it through the glossy reflection of the ice.

Tubbo was elusive, even out there in Snowchester. He was a ghost in the halls and hills, more likely to be felt than seen. Tubbo was the door that had been closed or locked, he was a matching set of prints through the snow, one treading out to his workshop and one coming home. It was better not to look for him, and wait for him to wear himself out. Then, in the small hours of the night, Ranboo could turn away from the shattered mirror, tuck tail and go home.

It was no small task to look away, however. He was a moth to flame.

The first time he had wandered out onto the ice, it had been a shock to see his own face—eyes, two of them, nose, and frowning mouth all shimmering back at him with more clarity than he had ever thought possible. There was a reason Ranboo had made his home in a ghost town, comforted by the empty streets and desolate halls of houses unlived-in, but even this had not been enough to avoid the haunting feeling of eyes watching him. The only difference between L'Manberg and there was that it was his reflection that he locked eyes with.

The ghost of Snowchester, his husband, did not stare. Tubbo roamed the grounds, like a subtle orchestral background music, eyes down, pace slow and plodding. It was clear that the man had things to do, but he wandered through to them like they had already been finished long ago. When Ranboo lingered at the beachhead, or spent too long staring through a broken window, Tubbo did not make him feel keenly observed. There was no pin through his abdomen nor magnifying glass under which he was placed. It was odd.

Ranboo stood alone on the ice, looking down, until every single star had emblazoned itself onto the galaxy that spread out before him—fractured in places like a broken window, or mirror, or rended flesh. And then he retired home, to sit in front of a fireplace beside another dead man walking.

Sometimes, when he came in from the cold and stretched the delicate membranes of his wings, warming them by the fire, he would catch a glimpse of Tubbo's face lit by flames and it reminded him of Dream. The distant look in his eyes, shadowed by the bangs that he kept overgrown and wild, those were different. But the hint of freckles, now faded from the winter, and the long eyelashes and the downward gaze. Even the creeping tendrils of burn scars crawling up the side of his face seemed a touch familiar. They reminded him of the thief, clad in green and white, although as soon as Ranboo noticed the similarities he found that he couldn't recall when he had ever been close enough to see such things on Dream.

Then Tubbo would smile, a small wry thing, and the illusion would fade completely.

In the midst of Dream's imprisonment, he wandered indoors and found Tubbo pacing about. He carried a sleeping Michael in his arms, both of them bundled up in a wool blanket. Ranboo joined them, falling in step easily and yawning.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked as they walked, occasionally pausing to douse a candle.

"Nothing." Tubbo said, after a moment's consideration. The word was tinged with relief, like the first deep breath after he had been holding it for too long.

After living together for a time, after taking in Michael and trying to do right by him, they both still had their secrets. Maybe that wasn't the right word. There was a sense that they both knew what the other wouldn't say, but neither of them acknowledged it. Tubbo's time dealing with the burning phoenix that was L'Manberg had left too many scars for Ranboo not to notice. He had moved out into the snowy wasteland for a reason, he had gathered an arsenal to his home for a reason, but no words passed between them. His husband was a man in a glass cage, acutely perceptible.

Ranboo said nothing, trying to make space for Tubbo to speak his mind, while also trying his best not to force him to say anything at all.

"It's nice." Tubbo said finally, shrugging. "Not worrying about anything, not thinking. You know?"

"Definitely." Ranboo smiled. Privately, he wondered—if Tubbo was a glass cage, what did that make him?

* * *

After Dream's escape, their first meeting together again was a somber one. For once, the man wasn't armed to the teeth, wasn't hidden under a pile of armor. Instead, he had simple clothes on. Pants and a thin loose shirt, both of them hung awkwardly on his thin and scarred body. He looked hardly like the man he had before, though the man he had looked like before could have been a netherite automaton, so Ranboo wasn't sure that meant much.

"When we… regain control," Dream spoke with an angry and tired slant, due in part to the broken jaw that had healed over in the Vault, "I think you should take back your birthright."

Ranboo sat down by their campfire, one that he had put together hastily when it became clear that his ally was hardly in any condition to do so himself. He had found Dream hiding in the branches of a tree, crouched and bent awkwardly as he kept a wary eye out. So Ranboo had done the work of finding firewood and checking the woods for any spies, using the time to school his features. He couldn't stare when they spoke.

"What do you mean?" He asked, stretching out his wings and trying to soak up every bit of warmth he could through the membrane and thin bones.

Dream looked away, off into the darkness. "The End. It should be yours."

His stomach churned at the offer. A thousand thoughts seemed to rise to the surface of his mind, and then sink before he could hear them all the way through. Dream must have seen, must have noticed the grimace forming on his face.

"The Nether too, if you want it." He spoke quickly, voice taking on a pleading edge. "I'm sure we could negotiate travel agreements. You deserve something, and all of that is supposed to belong to you."

Ranboo was offended. He couldn't parse why, though. It wasn't that long ago that he had thought their world had turned into a nightmare, a hell, that he would have opted to run away from.

"Do you regret bringing me to the Overworld?" He asked, curiosity getting the better of him. "Closing off the End?"

Dream pursed his lips, a sour expression on his face. He seemed to regain some of his old poise, sitting up and straightening his shoulders. None of it hid the thin line of his body, the places where bone had fused, the scars on his skin, or the unkempt but freshly shorn hair. He lifted his chin anyways. "No."

Reluctantly, Ranboo's pity made way for fondness that seemed to be rekindling at the sight of the man's stubbornness. He thought for a while, silently wondering why Dream didn't let people see him like this—like Ranboo saw him. If he bared his soul like this, maybe they would take pity on him too. Not just because of his imprisonment. After all, a great number of his scars were older than that, carried for years. Then again, many of them had been the source of those scars, and Dream's evident stubbornness hadn't helped things.

Maybe spending his whole life in armor was how he bared his soul. Strange man.

But he had taught Ranboo a lot. He had been… generous with his time, limited though it was. Dream was a man who lived in an obsidian box, and Ranboo had been allowed in. Sometimes forcibly.

"I'll have to think about it." Something like this couldn't be turned down lightly. They both needed time, and space, to unravel their emotions about Pandora's Vault and set them aside. If Ranboo had learned any lesson from Dream, it was that sometimes you had to strangle an emotion into submission to do a hard thing. Especially if it was affection, especially if it was for a friend. "Take care, Dream."

* * *

In the morning, he woke to lightning and driving rain. It was unseasonably warm, and still half the water was coming down as hail. It pelted the roofs, like a child hammering at a half-broken xylophone, cacophonous tones punctuated by the rumbling of thunder. Questions bubbled and frothed in his mind, thoughts that had no origin. He shuffled out of bed, stretching his wings, tired and tense.

Tubbo was already up, as he tended to do. He was bent over sketches and blueprints at the dining table, making notes and minor changes as he ate. Ranboo glanced at the papers and tools, peering over his husband's shoulder to see what it was that had captured his attention this time.

"Firewood storage." Tubbo said, barely looking up from his work. "We use more than that shed can hold."

"I can gather the stone when this storm lets up." Ranboo offered, in an easy tone that brooked no argument, and carried on. He made his way to the front door, and shouldered it open against the wind and hail and rain, and then he stood.

He watched the hail, small and biting, as it melted on the ground and then froze again. He watched the rain as it blew in, trailing on the white floor and mixing in with the slurry on their front steps. Ranboo had no idea what they were going to do about this ice. After the storm, it was going to be dangerous to walk on the usual paths. Everything was going to be a slipping hazard. They might have to shovel it.

The weather served only a brief distraction from everything weighing on him.

What *was* he? Where was he going? For some reason, he couldn't shake the thought that he had to make a decision about his future. He had to decide, here and now, what he was working towards, what he was building.

Michael appeared at his side, tugging silently at Ranboo's pant leg until his father picked him up. All things considered, Ranboo couldn't say that he would always live in Snowchester. He liked it there a lot. He liked the gentle, insidious winters and the strange summers. He liked the ice fields on the beachhead, he liked the moon and the stars at night. He liked being here with Tubbo and Michael, seeing them go about their days and helping in any way he could.

He thought about the firewood storage that they were going to build. They would need to take down the old one, and figure out what was seasoned and what needed more time. Maybe they could use some of the old shed for firewood, cut it up into pieces and let it season in the new one. It wasn't old enough to be rotted, but could wood like that be burned if it had been stained?

Then they'd need stone, for a foundation, and more wood for the structure. He should look at Tubbo's plans again, see what else they might need.

"Even if we leave Snowchester, one day..." Ranboo thought aloud, then trailed off.

The hail eased a little as he stood there, the day starting to warm despite itself. After several long minutes of thinking, he looked at Michael.

"I'm staying." He said firmly. "In the Overworld. With all our friends." He wasn't sure why the thought needed clarification, or needed to be spoken at all, but having decided such a thing put him at ease.

"You're letting all the cold in." Tubbo found them in the entryway, a cup of tea in his hand. His complaint was toothless, undermined by the smile in his voice. He stopped beside Ranboo in the doorway, and looked out at the rain with a curious expression on his face. His mouth in a crooked line, his brows stitched together, as if the weather was a puzzle for him to solve, as if it might tell him what Ranboo was thinking.

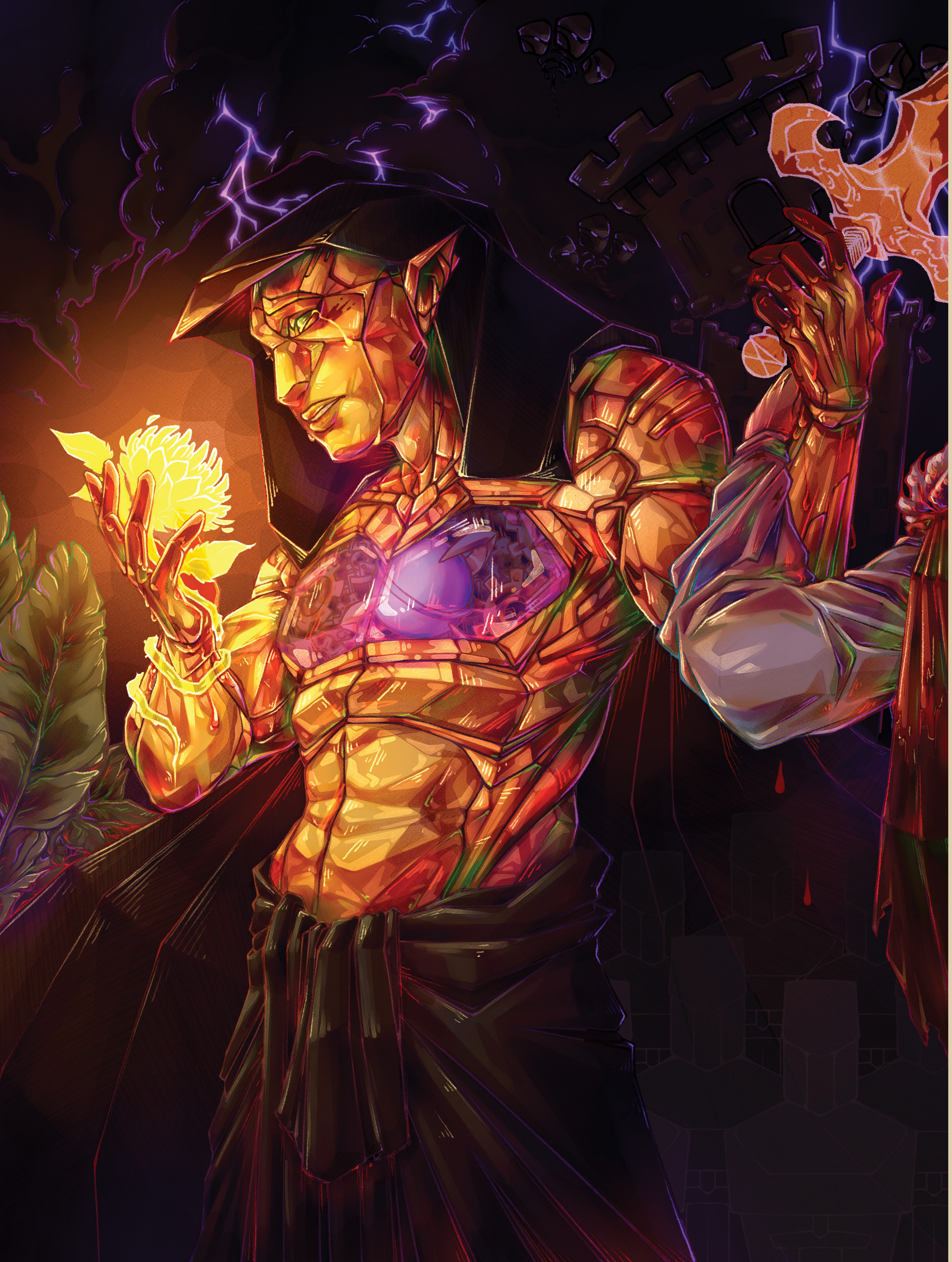
"Just thinking about the future. The shed, mostly." Ranboo told him, not quite ready to tell the whole truth.

"Ah." Tubbo crossed his arms, nodding to himself. After a moment he yawned. "Hold still."

Ranboo stiffened, holding his shape as still as he possibly could. He was statuesque, in the doorway of their home, and Tubbo leaned in.

His head butted against Ranboo's arm, and he leaned heavily against his husband in the thin, storm light. Little by little, Ranboo relaxed too, his thoughts unwinding and putting themselves away as he stood with the family that he had chosen in the home that he had chosen. That he would keep choosing.

THE END.



Totem of Death, Forever Undying

LONG AGO, IN the sea and salty brine, the Great God Prime was born, last of the elder gods that rule the pantheon. They were the god of balance and order and creation, destined to be their holy judge and peacekeeper.

Unfortunately, the pantheon is... *difficult*, to put it mildly.

Although the pantheon was mostly balanced, the gods often bickered. With the likes of DreamXD—the radiant Father Life—and Mumza—the great Mother Death—that was to be expected. Usually the calm, orderly inevitably of Death was enough to keep the chaos of Life in line, but when the elder god Drista, Daughter Strife, came into existence after XD created the pesky creatures we call humans, that all changed.

Try as she might, Mumza could not keep up with her opposite, even after using her own magic to create the demi-gods called The Blood God and the Angel of Death. The human race flourished at an alarming rate, overrunning the world, destroying everything it touched like a plague, and finally, the great cosmic chaos from which the universe and its magic rose from had had enough.

Prime was born, and as the universe went into labor, the world was leveled in a cataclysm whose echoes would ring in the earth for millennia.

Still, it wasn't enough.

Humans and cockroaches are remarkably similar, in the respects of them *somehow* clawing their way out of the rubble to survive anything and everything the universe throws at them. Slighted by the destruction of his precious experiments like a child whose ant farm had been knocked over, XD flew into a rage, and the pantheon went to war.

Naturally, the mortals sided with Life. It was only in their nature, and some of the gods felt bad for them, and joined XD. Some firmly sided with Death and regarded the mortals as nuisances and cannon fodder, while others went into hiding to avoid taking sides. Some even went so far as to seal themselves away in the Nether, avoiding the conflict in its entirety.

Prime, of course, stood by Mumza unwaveringly, driven purely by logic. They crafted everything Mother Death and her followers needed to battle Father Life—zombies and skeletons from the long-forgotten bones of the humans from Before; Creepers and Blazes from buried, undetonated shells; giant spiders and Ghasts and all sorts of vicious creatures made with the singular purpose of killing. Prime even created the Endermen as Mumza's personal guards, and a giant dragon with Void-black wings for Mother Death to use as her steed.

The crown jewel of Prime's creations, however, were the Totems.

They were warriors. Golden warriors meant to lead Mother Death's armies, meant to command legions. They were automatons, twenty feet tall and crafted from the purest Nether gold, and each was powered by a Heart of the Sea that gifted them extraordinary magic of shapeshifting and strength. They were given the fangs of sharks along with their human appearances, and the strongest among them bore the wings of skuas so they could fly over the battlefields like Valkyries.

These Totems were no Valkyries. They were death machines, pure and simple; they were empty husks that followed orders and killed without question.

Except for one.

They called him The Fool because of his arrogance.

Foolish was one of the strongest Totems, and by far the most frightening. They say he was a defective model that was planned to be scrapped; they say he had a mind of his own before anyone truly realized. They say he was the bodyguard of the rebellious King of Stars, and that Her Majesty Eret, angry and slighted by how her father—the trickster god Herobrine—had been denied a seat on the pantheon, created the cult of Wither and Decay, hell-bent on world domination.

All anyone knows is that one day, the Totem the Mother Death called Foolish grew a mind of his own, and when he did, the results were deadly.

The Heart of the Sea that powered him had a crack in it, that's what the stories say. With a crack like that, the magic of the ocean bled into his Nether-gold body and infused it with the power of violent storms and hurricanes. It changed him, and when Foolish truly became alive, the universe trembled in terror and awe as he struck Prime from the skies with a blast of lightning.

"How *dare* you," he snarled, pinning Prime to the ground with a foot on their chest. "How dare you enslave me and my brothers for your war."

Prime merely grinned, barely breathing as they spat out a mouthful of ichor. "You foolish, *Foolish* creature. Your brothers aren't alive, and neither are you. You are automatons, you are Totems, and I alone command you—"

No one knows what happened next.

The universe convulsed as *something* happened; it's unknown whether or not Prime died that day or something worse, but nothing was ever the same. The civil war screeched to a halt in a terrified ceasefire as Foolish and Eret went mad with their newfound power and went on a rampage, killing indiscriminately for the sake of killing. They wreaked havoc on the world with storms created by a single flap of Foolish's massive golden wings, and drained the life from the earth with Eret's Wither beasts, created from twisted, dark magical energy. Terrified, the other gods formed a shaky truce, and threw every ounce of their power into stopping the Wither Cult and its bloodthirsty leaders.

On that day, a hurricane struck the mainland.

Golden feathers rained from the sky as The Fool's wings were torn from his back, and the Totem of Death fell into the sea from whence his former master came. The King fell too, to the earth, memories gone and godliness stripped away like snakeskin.

The ceasefire between the gods remained for millennia, and Foolish pulled himself from the waves, battered and broken and so, so *scared*.

He was no longer a god.

He was more powerful than a human could ever be, yes. He could change shape and command the storms and would never succumb to illness or old age, but now, his power had limits. He was stronger and faster and was still made of metal and godly magic, but he could die now, and Foolish was determined to never let that happen.

He was battered, wounded and exhausted from his fall.

He collapsed, at the steps of a mansion deep in a dark oak forest. As dawn broke, a Pillager guard on patrol stumbled across him, a golden Totem who bled ichor from his back, where wings used to be.

“Who are you?” The Evoker who led these Pillagers asked, as the guards dragged Foolish into their mansion. “I smell the ichor in your veins. I hear the clicks and creaks of gears inside you, and the magic of the Sea flows from your heart. What are you, and where did you come from?”

“I am a god!” Foolish roared, and outside the mansion, thunder rumbled as his golden skin darkened silver as shark’s hide, and his eyes burned crimson. “I was stripped of my power, banished unjustly and thrown to the wolves for rebelling against those who enslaved me and my brothers! I am the *Totem of Death!*”

“Totem of Death, you say?”

Now, as we all know, humans tend to crave power, and fear death more than anything in this world. The Cult of the Pillagers is a prime example of when this fear and craving becomes obsessive, takes control, turns into a thirst that will never be quenched. They delved into forbidden magic, committed horrible atrocities in the name of attaining immortality, and were eventually banished to the depths of the dark oak forests, where they continued their cruel experiments and horrid rituals.

They were fascinated by Foolish and equally galvanized by the idea of killing gods, and welcomed him into their ranks with open arms.

Soon after, Foolish became a warlord.

He didn’t cause enough trouble to attract the attention of the gods, or maybe they were too absorbed in their own war to notice as he led raids on kingdoms, desecrating temples and massacring entire towns. The Pillagers followed gleefully at his heels like hunting dogs, basking in his glory and showering him with offerings and sacrifices. They worshiped him as the god of violent storms and hurricanes, and with the help of his magic, they mastered the summoning of monsters like Vexes and Withers to aid them. With every being he slaughtered, Foolish grew stronger yet, and it wasn’t long before he developed a taste for hunting angels.

The Wither Cult was reborn in fire and bloodshed, and finally, the gods began to take notice.

Philza, the Angel of Death, and Technoblade, Blade of the Blood God, were sent to deal with Foolish and his followers. The battle was long and bloody and countless were slaughtered on both sides, but if humans have one strength, it’s being *colossally* stubborn. As the Angel, the Blade, and their armies decimated the Wither Cult, Foolish and the Evokers became desperate, powerless against the death magic wielded against them.

That is, until they discovered a way to harness it for themselves.

It’s a simple spell, really. With Foolish’s help, the Evokers learned to reverse magic that heals, and instead learned to *drain*. The life force of a healthy, decent-sized animal, like a dog, sheep, reasonably large chicken, or gods forbid a *person*, was enough to replace one’s own. With practice, the Pillagers eventually created small Totems to carry on their belts in battle, crafted from gold and emerald and modeled after Foolish’s towering form. If a warrior fell, struck down by blade or arrow or anything of the sort, mere moments later they would rise again, flesh and bone knit back together by the life force of whatever creature that had been infused in the totem, which would crumble to dust after its power was used up.

The magic took its toll on the mortals. The Pillagers’ skin turned ashen grey from the effects of the Wither, and experienced warriors bore scars from wounds that should've killed them, glowing a faint green like the cracks in their flesh had been filled with emerald.

Foolish, now graced with armies who could fall again and again and still keep fighting, went on a rampage.

He burned entire kingdoms to the ground, he conquered, he slaughtered, he pillaged, all because he could. The world grew to fear the dreaded Totem of Death and his legions of ashen-skinned warriors who refused to die, and even minor deities began to fall at their hands. For centuries the world was locked in terror, and the gods hid, refusing to answer prayers for fear of the monster they'd created.

However, no empire will last forever; no reign of terror will go unchallenged.

Maybe it was the Fates, or forces beyond even the gods' control that brought Eret to a kingdom far to the west when she fell, at the edge of the vast, empty desert wastes. Maybe it was Lady Luck, maybe it was something else, but the child of Herobrine once again ascended to a throne to rule. No one knew the identity of the kingdom's shadowy King who never aged nor died, who held the throne through trickery and subterfuge, but she was a beloved, benevolent ruler. When the Wither Cult reached their borders, Eret's soldiers fought like demons and felled legions of Foolish's strongest warriors, but it wasn't enough.

Once again, the King watched their kingdom crumble before their eyes.

It was by the light of the waxing moon that the Wither Cult reached the kingdom's walls, and the battle was a massacre on both sides. Storms that could never normally strike the desert roiled in the sky for days, the howling wind blowing fire and ash into the clouds, which wept tears of sulfur as the battle raged on. The sandy earth turned to mud in the endless maelstrom, and the entire city crumbled in the hurricane it was never meant to withstand.

Eret's armies fell. The Pillagers slaughtered the people, looting homes and planting their banners. Foolish set out to the palace, laughing maniacally, blood and rainwater gleaming on his silver-black skin in the glow of the lightning that flickered in the sky and from his hands.

The royal guard stood no chance. Foolish's Pillager warriors slaughtered them all.

But when they reached the throne room, Foolish was struck with horror and sickening guilt by the being on the other end of his blade.

Eret knelt, slumped on the steps of her throne in her battered cloak and armor. Their crown lay discarded on the floor as they vomited blood, gasping for breath, and their eyes burned bright white, brighter than the full moon struggling to watch the battle through the clouds.

She was bleeding, bleeding from a gash in her side.

"Eret?" Foolish blurted in horror.

Eret lifted her head, brushing unkempt brown curls from her beaten, bloody face, and their eyes met.

There was no recognition in her glowing gaze.

"Look at what you've done," Eret rasped, her breath shuddering miserably as she struggled to rise. "My people. You slaughtered them, *you slaughtered my innocent people!*"

"It's me," Foolish pleaded, his crimson eyes turning green for the first time in years. "It's me, Foolish. Don't you remember? They cast us out, we fell together—"

"I've never met you before in my life!" Eret snarled, tears welling in their eyes as they staggered to their feet, unsteadily drawing their sword. "I would remember a beast like you in my kingdom! If a monster like you tried to come here, I would've slain you where you stood!"

Foolish roared with rage and desperation.

The Pillagers watched in awe as they clashed, Foolish's prismarine trident shooting sparks of lightning into the air as Eret's blade—a blade made of crying obsidian and infused with the essence of the Wither itself—slammed against it. Eret screamed, screamed with the vengeance of a mother who'd lost her child and a man whose honor had been stripped away, her rage fueling the cold white fire in her eyes, but the fight didn't last long.

Despite still clinging to some of her godly essence just like Foolish was, she was too injured, too tired.

"Eret, please," Foolish begged as Eret fell to their knees, gasping with pain and exhaustion. "Please, it's me. Join me. Remember me. Remember *us*. I don't want to—"

"Kill me," Eret choked, with nothing but grief and cold, cold fury in her eyes. "Kill me, *you monster*."

Foolish raised his trident.

In that moment, his heart split in two, and the storm that had been raging for days finally broke.

Foolish stood there, silver-black skin and crimson eyes, bathed in the moonlight, his breath trembling with grief and terror.

The Pillagers stepped forward. Two of them grabbed Eret and forced her to the ground, and her head *thunked* painfully against the stone floor. She didn't move, even when a Vindicator hefted his axe over her neck and prepared to swing it.

And then Foolish *screamed*.

A shockwave of lightning and howling wind blasted outward from his body, shattering the walls of the throne room. The earth trembled, wind whipping, thunder rolling, and the Evokers tried to put up shields of magic, but they weren't fast enough.

The palace imploded.

A split second of calm washed over the battle in the streets, as the Pillagers and royal soldiers faltered, watching in shock as the entire palace collapsed in on itself.

And then Foolish burst from the wreckage, with Eret's unconscious form in his arms, shrouded by a hurricane.

The people below watched in shock as he gently set Eret down, tears welling in his eyes as he brushed their hair from their face and kissed their forehead. Then he turned, brow furrowed with rage and horrible anguish, and once again, he *screamed*.

The people scattered in terror, but it was too late. Lightning arced over the city, blasting the buildings to rubble until there was nothing left but charred ruins and countless corpses, all of it covered in thin layers of glass from the spray of molten sand.

And Eret lay at the center of it all, unscathed and unconscious.

She would not wake, not tonight. When she did it would be days later, and Foolish would be long gone.

But for now, Foolish would watch the ruins burn, and the gentle rains of the dying storm that bathed everything a soft amber as dawn began to break.

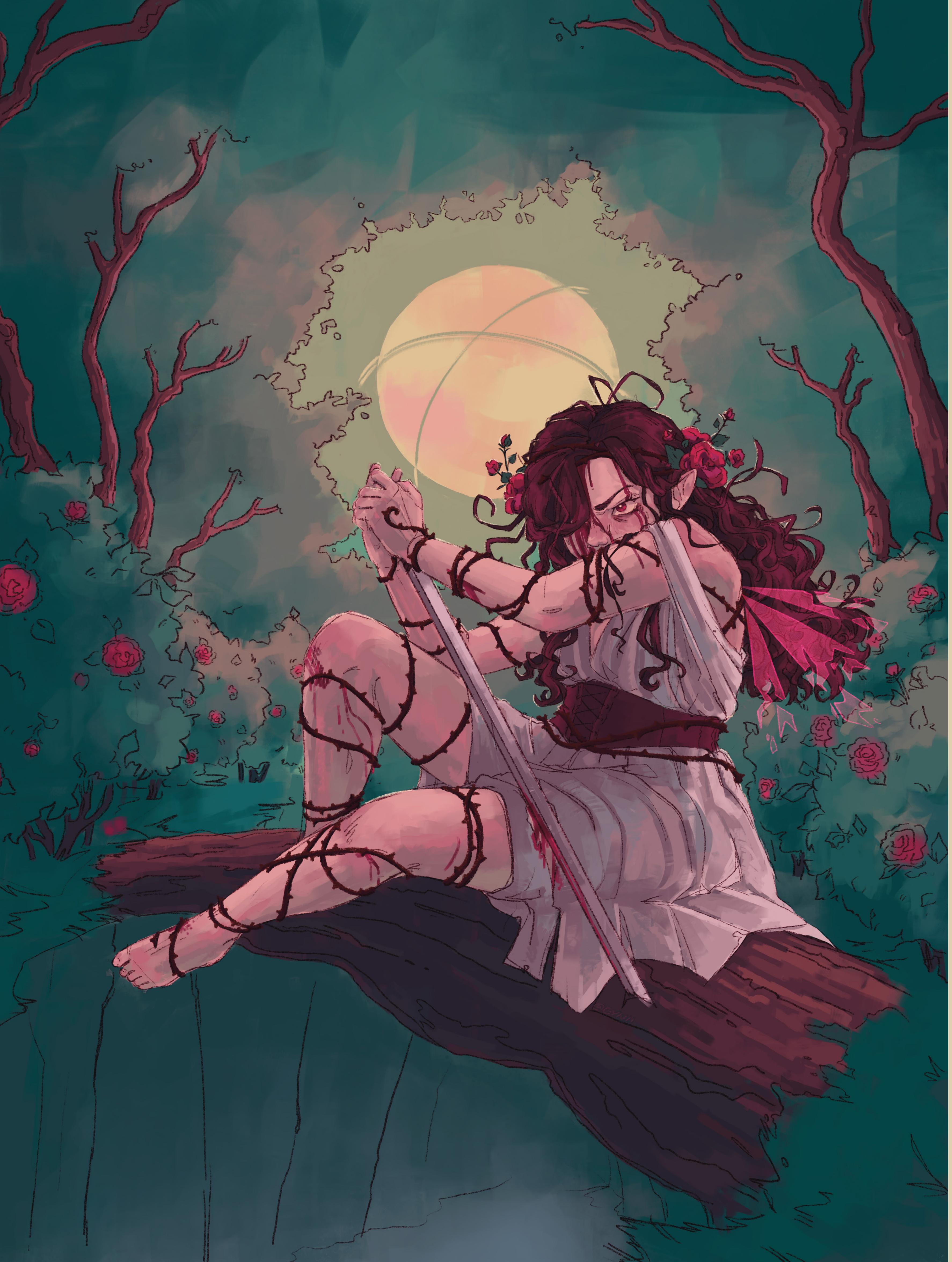
He would watch, kneeling next to Eret's unconscious form.

He would watch, weeping tears of gold, watching his silver sharkskin melt away in the warm rain to reveal his aureate Totem skin beneath. His eyes became green again, green as the grasses that burst through the glass that covered the ground, fed by the oasis born from the grief of a god.

He would rise to his feet with the sun, and walk away into the vast wastes of the desert, not to be seen again for millennia.

And Eret would wake, lying in an oasis in the desert ruins. The legends say that the ruins still exist, as does the oasis, which will never die as long as the Totem God still lives. Drinking from the spring itself is said to grant eternal life, but it has yet to be found.

It is foretold that the Totem will return from the desert, one day, and only chaos will follow.



The Rot and the Rose

THE GIRL WAS told to stay away from the forest, for the forest was full of terrifying things, ugly things, with sharp teeth with which to drag wayward children from the well-worn path and deeper into the moss-choked woods, where their screams would be muffled by strangling vines. They warned her of half-ruined mansions guarded by vengeful witches, and of sleeping gods that were not to be disturbed. In hushed whispers, they spoke of the ravenous undead, waiting under the thick shadows of ancient oak trees for those foolish enough to step into the unkind forest.

But Hannah of the roses was unafraid.

She had been born blessed, faster and stronger and sturdier than all the children around her. Her childhood had been spent cheating death; her adolescence had been spent dealing it. She was easy to underestimate, of course, with her smallness and youth. They saw her wide eyes, her soft smile, her footsteps like a dance along a soft meadow, and they thought her prey instead of a predator in masquerade. But none of them ever lived long enough to make the same mistake twice.

Didn't they know? she'd laughed to herself as she stood knee-deep in a massacre of her own making. *Didn't they know this rose has the sharpest thorns?*

Nothing that lurked in the forest could touch her, no witch nor monster nor god.

And when one stripped back the fear and the shadows, the forest, the girl discovered, could actually be quite beautiful. The rivers ran through it undisturbed, sparkling like diamonds under the golden-green light of the sun falling through the foliage. Birds the size of her palm and prowling wolves stalked through trees that seemed, to her, as old as the earth itself. Sometimes, if she was lucky and managed to hold herself very still, she could manage to creep up behind one of the winter wolves that were still drowsy from their hibernation. With bones as her peace offering, the wolf would allow her to run her hands through its thick fur until some sound or another startled it away. And then Hannah was off to find something else to humor her. The forest was more than happy to provide.

Eventually, as the years wore on, the girl became as much part of the forest as the old wisteria that had dug its roots deep. If they wanted to remove it now, they would have to cut it down or cut it out of the very earth.

And so the girl lived in the forest she was supposed to fear, and she slept on a bed of soft grass. Hannah of the roses, Hannah of the forest did not stir through the night, even when the forest began to die.

It started quietly, as most assassinations did.

First: the cricketsong, which always welcomed nightfall in echoing crescendos, ceasing only when the last and most stubborn of the stars finally made its appearance in the ink-blank sky. But, tonight, the crickets could not wait. It was a slow silencing, starting first with the crickets by the lake, and then the crickets by the North Hill, and then, suddenly, all at once, they were all snuffed out, leaving behind an unnatural quiet.

Second: the wolves. The wolves had lived in the forest longer than Hannah; if the forest was in her bones, then the wolves had teeth of bark and snouts built tough for the wild undergrowth and eyes to see through even the thickest of the forest's shadows. The wolves had grown alongside the oldest of the oak trees, and they could feel the sickness take hold in the earth. They, too, felt it sink its fangs into the forest's bloodstream, injecting something vile and deadly into the roots, into the river waters, into the very air itself. The wolves retreated into their caves a little deeper that night, huddling in terrified packs. Even the toughest of them cowered, backed against the cold caverns, knowing any beast caught alone in the forest tonight would not see the dawn.

Third: the plants. Oh, how agonizingly they perished. It was less of a death and more of a bleaching—the colors draining like blood running freely from an open wound. Everything that was once green and alive slowly turned white and dead: the grass, the trees, the leaves of every rose.

That night, with the moon low on the horizon—as if it, too, sensed the danger far below and turned grim spectator—life was fleeing from the forest.

And in its place: the creeping red vines of a hungry god.

* * *

Hannah woke to silence, and knew immediately that something was terribly wrong.

While cricketsong heralded the night, birdsong was the friend of dawn, but although Hannah could see the sun high above her, she could hear no hummingbird nor shrike. With a start, she rose to her feet, and found the forest around her decaying.

The grass around her was white as bone, and she found the only thing untouched was the ground where she had laid down to rest the night before. It retained her green silhouette, but even as Hannah watched, the white rot was taking hold: creeping through the grass one blade at a time until there was no trace of Hannah's sleeping form left.

And she knew then that the rot would take her, too.

The girl began to run—through the forest of ivory trees with branches stripped bare of leaves, as if some callous hand had gone through them all and *pulled*, through the empty underbrush and the quiet streams, through the clearings she used to haunt. She found nothing and no one, and still she felt eyes on her, like some silent predator was stalking her through the woods, following her panicked feet. But everywhere she looked, there was only more of the same bleak white landscape.

She began to call out for old friends.

"Clever fox?" she pleaded. "Cunning snake? Swift-footed deer?"

But if they were there to hear her, they did not respond.

And then Hannah felt it, the drop in the still air. Like the forest was holding its breath. Like winter had come unseasonably early.

She paused between the roots of an old tree, letting it cocoon her, as if its dead bark might protect her from what was coming: the rot and the cold and the bleaching white.

Death was a hunter. And it was coming for her.

For the first time in her brief life, Hannah was afraid. She had believed the forest would protect her, but the forest was dead or dying or too terrified to speak. Even as she begged and begged for its help, only the echo of her own fragile voice responded.

She remembered, of course, her own quarries. How they'd trembled in fear at the very end. How they, too, had begged her to still her swordhand. How they'd bargained. How, in their desperation, they'd turned to their old gods and prayed.

It had not helped them, not in the slightest.

But, Hannah thought, *maybe they were just praying to the wrong god.*

And so, driven to faith by fear, with the bone trees and the dead grass as her altar, Hannah of the roses chose a god, and she prayed.

"Please," she whispered. "Please, please, help me."

She waited. And it seemed the white death waited, too; she felt it pause under the shadows of the branches, watching her—in amusement or curiosity, she dared not guess.

For a long moment, there was nothing.

And then, a voice, a single word, an echoing question: "Why?"

Hannah raised her head, and saw god.

He was shorter than she imagined him to be. He was still tall, towering over her, but he was hardly the collosal, sun-eclipsing leviathan the myths and old wives' tales made him out to be. He was dressed in pale-green robes, a mimicry of the once-living forest, and it came down around him smooth running water. His hands were bare, and so were his feet, and they were not—as the legends said—made of diamond or gold, but of pale, freckled skin.

All in all, Hannah thought, the god looked strangely human.

The only thing otherworldly about him was the wooden mask he wore. A face was carved into its surface, but whoever had done it had not been meticulous. It was like a careless, loveless gouging: just two violent lines crossing each other and, below it, an open-mouthed smile done in three quick strokes.

When the god spoke again, the mask didn't so much as shift.

"Why should I help you?" the god asked.

"Because," Hannah began, and found she did not know how to finish. She asked herself the same question: *Why*? Why should a god help her? Simply because she asked? Simply because she was terrified enough to beg?

The god sensed her uncertainty. His masked face tipped to the side, considering her with eyes she couldn't see. "I know of you, Hannah of the roses, Hannah of the slaughter. You serve your own cause, offer blood as sacrifice to your own altar." He leaned in until all Hannah could see was the smiling face-that-was-not-a-face. "You have never once paid tribute at my shrine. So, tell me, girl, and tell me truthfully: why do you think I should help you now, when you have no devotion to be rewarded? Why should you live?"

Cold-handed Death waited for Hannah's answer, too.

"Because," she said, desperate, despairing, newly devoted, "I want to."

It was a simple answer. It was a selfish answer. And, most importantly, it was the truth.

The masked god was amused.

"You *want* to," he repeated slowly. "Fate has spoiled you, little redbird.

It has kept you safe in a warm nest and fed you whenever you chirped. You have never wanted for anything. Until now. Mercurial Fate is pushing you off the tree, coddled girl. What ever shall you do?”

His hands came up to touch her face, cradling it without affection. It was an objective inspection and nothing more, like how one would hold a new sword, testing its weight, assessing the sharpness of its blade before deciding if it was worth wielding.

And then, still with his hands pressed against her cheeks, the god said, “Tell me what you *want* to do.”

The girl did not hesitate this time. “I want to fly.”

The god with the ever-smiling mask gave the girl, the redbird, the rose one final look.

“As you wish,” he said, and was gone.

The chill returned immediately. Death had been patient, waiting, and now it pounced with its bleaching claws, ready to tear and mangle and bleed out the last colorful thing in the forest. But Hannah of the roses stared Death down with leaf-green eyes, fearless and bold and god-blessed. And then she flew away.

She took to the skies, where nothing—not even Death—could touch her. With an exultant laugh, Hannah spun through the clouds and sunlight with wings of shimmering spider silk. She flew higher and higher, even higher than the redbirds the smiling god thought were her kin. She left it all behind: the forest, the cold, the rot, and when she was sure she was as high as the gods themselves, she looked down at the devastation below.

The forest was spread over the ground like a blanket of snow, a sea of salt. White and dead and rotted down. And at its center, where the illness first took hold, something was pulsing, like the beating red heart of some giant beast. Hannah could see it, glimmering through the bleached-white trees like a ruby lost among a string of pearls.

She descended slowly, inch by inch, staring in wonder and confusion at the scarlet root of all evil. She was right; it *did* look like a heart, with veins and arteries spilling out of its pulsing chambers and crawling through the forest floor.

But there was something else it looked like.

Death, it seemed, looked like an egg.

Hannah of the skies drifted aimlessly above the bone-trees. She had no home to return to, no friends left alive. If there were any survivors of the Great Bleaching, she could not find them, or they did not want to be found.

Perhaps, she thought, she could return to the village—that distant place where she was born. But there was nothing and no one for her there, either, just ghosts and strangers who would raise the alarm at the sight of her.

For the first few days, there was only melancholy in her heart. She looked at the white ruins, and she grieved its once-lush foliage, its once-noisy brooks, its once-living flower fields. And then, quickly, the grief soured into anger. And the anger hardened into resolve.

The Egg was a hungry animal, feasting on the bones of what used to be Hannah’s home. But an animal could be hunted. An animal could be killed.

Hannah’s wings beat a steady rhythm as she descended, once more, into the forest of her childhood. The Egg knew of her presence at once, and every tree and shadow turned sinister. But winged Hannah had her sword ready.

With a violent smile like a god’s, Hannah said to the trees, “Let the hunt begin.”

Hannah of the slaughter, the god called her, and who was she to disobey?

The girl who was a fairy who was a hunter carved her way through the dead forest with a sword of thorns. If the Egg was a heart, then she would bleed it dry.

She started with its ruby-red veins, severing it cleanly and watching it writhe before it went still. Then she moved on to the next. Then the next. And the next. She only spared it as much mercy as it deserved.

When the death-egg finally caught up to her, she had its lifeblood draped around her shoulders like spoils of war. It reached for her with hands like creeping vines, but her wings pulled her back into the safety of the air. “Come catch me,” she taunted, knowing full well it could not.

And so began their chase. Hannah was a lone fighter, but she struck quick and struck true, flying away before the Egg could take hold. She slashed and tore and ripped and sundered, not minding the way the scarlet poison sunk into her skin and clothes. Once, just once, the Egg caught her from behind, its vines wrapping around her middle and tightening like a vice. But Hannah merely dug her nails into it and slowly clawed her way through until she was free, leaving nothing behind but the bleeding scraps of her would-be assassin.

She was vengeance. She was the god’s righteous hand.

And nothing would stop her until she could tear that Egg down from its perch, piece by bloody piece.

It went on and on, the one-sided massacre (*really, was there any other kind?*) until Hannah felt it. The fear. But not hers. Never hers.

She moved deeper and deeper into the forest with her sword in hand, following the scent of a wounded animal until she found it at last; weak from the chase and bleeding out, the Egg waited for her in the clearing where it took root, a corrupted imitation of the very trees it killed. It glowed weakly in its death throes, its veins and vines nothing more than severed branches.

In the end, with her quarry cornered, the girl could do nothing more than laugh as she cut the bleeding heart out of the forest’s chest.

* * *

The Egg’s death did not bring the forest back to life, but that was alright. Hannah still guarded its corpse as if it did.

Be they human or witch or god, Hannah barred them all entry from the bone forest. And if they were foolish enough to test her patience, then they would find out what happened to greedy carrion birds. All but one of the flock would make it out alive, not out of mercy but out of warning. Hannah would lean over their wide-eyed face and take it gently in hands stained with their family’s blood.

“Run,” she’d whisper, “and tell them all about me.”

“Please,” one would dare to whisper back, “please we’re just humble hunters. We have mouths to feed—”

“Is that so?” Hannah replied with something like sympathy. “So do I,” and she dragged the sole survivor back into the forest. After all, the wolves, awakened from their death-slumber, needed fresh meat to recover their strength.

They all had their excuses, these would-be hunters. *Firewood to keep us warm through the winter. Food, please, even a handful of berries.* But Hannah had never been one for mercy, and whatever kindness she had left, the Egg had taken with it to its grave. If they were foolish enough to trespass, then they would receive a fool’s death.

Hannah wandered through the bone-trees, keeping her eternal patrol, until, inevitably, they came from the south with their torches lighting up the night like a grim reflection of the starry sky above. And this time, when she asked what they wanted, they did not speak of the forest.

“You,” was their simple, angry reply.

She would learn later that they were the children of the hunters she’d slaughtered, the mouths they’d failed to feed, now grown with vengeful fangs. It did not matter to her then when she was moving through them with her sword, cutting them down as easily as she'd done to their forefathers.

But there were too many, all at once, and Hannah made to flee, to take to the skies as she always did when she felt danger. But these wild-eyed children had grown up with stories of the blood fairy in the woods, and so they came prepared. Hannah's wings unfurled, and so did the hunters' net, arcing over her and pinning her to the forest floor.

The children gathered like vultures.

* * *

The smiling god found her weeping by the brook, entirely unharmed, save for the holes punctured straight through her gossamer wings. They fluttered around her in panic, trying to gather air beneath them. But the girl stayed where she was, a fairy grounded, a redbird clipped.

“You fell,” the god said, a belated answer to a question long-forgotten.

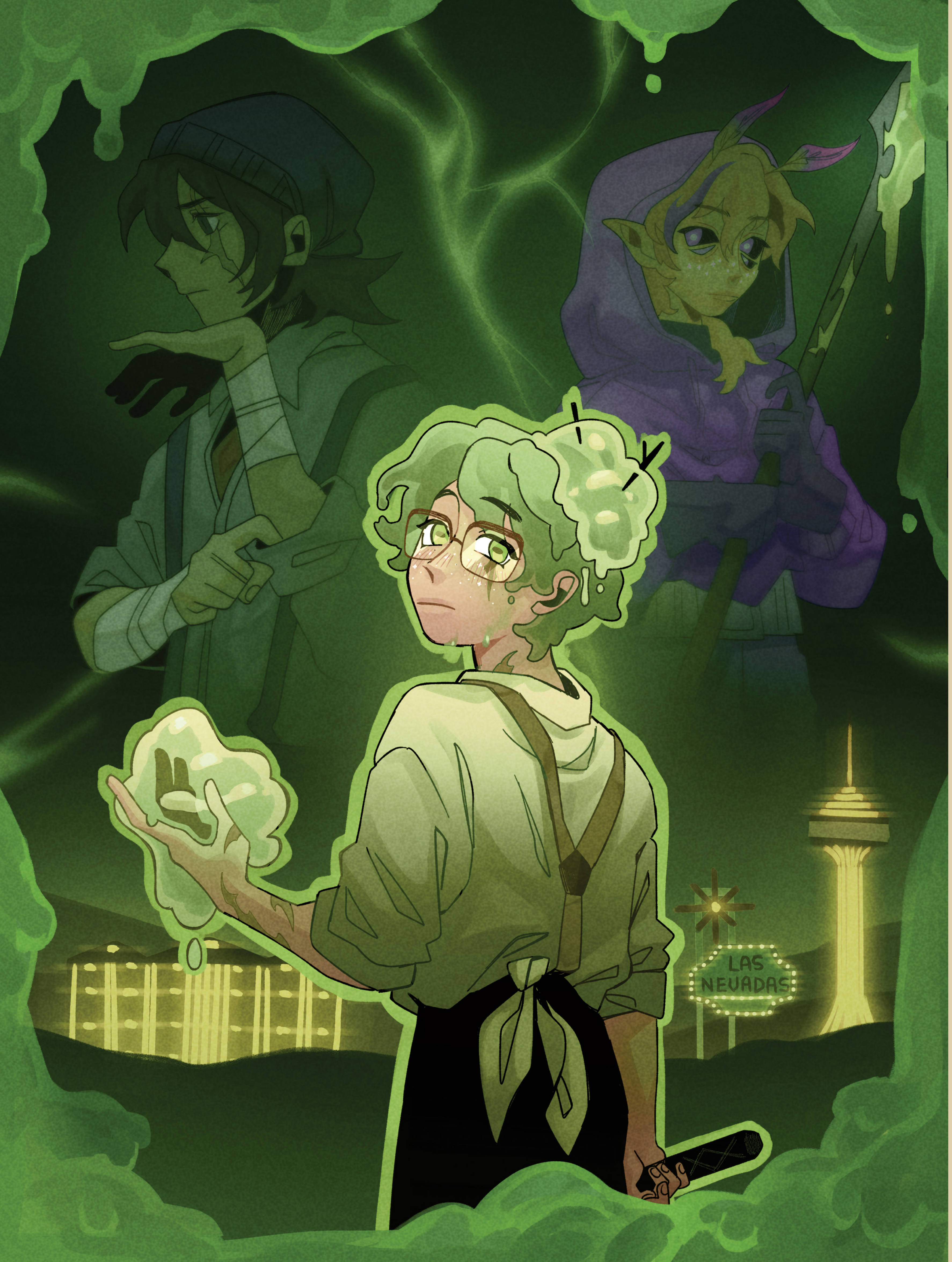
“Please,” the girl said, raising her tearstained face, her fingers wrapping around her shoulders, reaching back and back as if to soothe the pained pinion. “I want them back. Let me fly again.”

“Oh, little red,” the masked god cooed, seeming to mourn, seeming to taunt, “my generosity, once lost, cannot be restored.” He walked slowly to her, his robes whispered against the white grass. Once again, he took her face between his hands, and they were just as cold as they had been lifetimes ago. “You prayed to the right god. But you did not pray enough.”

And the god left the girl, alone with her broken wings.

* * *

The children were told to stay away from the forest, for the forest was full of terrifying things, ugly things, with sharp teeth with which to drag wayward children from the well-worn path and deeper into the bleached woods, where their screams would be muffled by scarlet vines. But the worst of the stories, the one that was sure to keep the children far away from the forest dark was the story of a woman in red who haunted the space between the bone-trees, her voice harsh and broken as she called out for a god who was done listening. The tales varied. Sometimes she was a ghost. Other times, she was a goddess exiled. But the simplest story of all was of Hannah of the forest, Hannah of the roses, Hannah of the flightless wings, who was once upon a time a girl, until she became a cautionary tale.



From One Echo to Another

TO BE A slime is to evolve.

Or, at least, it used to be. It should be. Slime is malleable, ever-changing, and it is all we are made of. Our hearts, our brains, our lungs. The same material stretched to fit many purposes. Likewise, we would stretch. We filled gaps in new ecosystems; we adapted to new environments. Form follows function. This is what once defined us: our ability to change.

As most of you know, those days are over. Our predecessors would cradle the dirt beneath them, hands outstretched, and let it guide in evolution. Our hands are smaller, dirt crumbling like gravel, slipping away before our eyes. We are not like other slime. We will never be like other slime.

You and I know this story well. But, as is tradition, I will tell you once again.

His name was Slimecicle. We were made in his image.

When he broke to the surface, he met a human first. Maybe he was lucky like that. As a true slime, his form changed to match. He walked like a human, spoke like a human, wore human shoes and suspenders and went to live in a human city. He spent his days alongside human neighbors.

Perhaps *human* isn't the best term. Slimes are ever-changing and ever-evolving, and over time Slimecicle took on the traits from all of Las Nevadas. A scar over his eye like his human companion. Sparkling, star-shaped freckles on his cheeks. A golden bracelet by his ankles. His neighbors weren't exactly human, but Slimecicle mimicked them nonetheless.

Isn't that interesting? His form changed. Not stuck like ours.

He was a student like us, though. He was put under immense pressure, and he turned hard-hearted. Ever obedient, he learned that the world was ruthless, that humanity was cruel. That humanity betrayed, that humanity deceived, that it was full of lies and trickery and other horrors.

Week after week, Slimecicle was given a new lesson. His companion, Quackity, lectured that attachments were weakness. Seek revenge whenever possible. Trust no-one.

You may notice that humans are bad with words. Maybe we are too, made in their image. Quackity would say these things, words pouring from his mouth, but his heart would shed truth where his tongue sprouted lies. *Don't form attachments,* he said, while caring for his city and its citizens. *Seek revenge and do not fail, or the bitterness will sting.* Yet Quackity's greatest revenge was a peaceful one, a beacon-like city brimming with success, and far from his violent cries.

Slimecicle learned in ways Quackity couldn't predict. Because that was the instinct of a slime: to change. Always listening. Always adapting. Quackity's mistake was thinking he could control Slimecicle's nature.

When Slimecicle broke the surface, all Quackity saw was something malleable, something he could shape. This is partially correct. But we do not change shape like ingots—we are not forged, poured into a mold, the final result all hard edges and smooth lines. Slimecicle was shaped by Quackity and his lessons, but he was also shaped by the city, its citizens, and Quackity's unspoken words. He was shaped by the quiet nights and small moments.

Slimecicle was the crossroads, the intersection between it all. War and peace. Doubt and trust. Human and, well, not.

Eventually, he was the one who paid for Las Nevadas' mistakes.

Quackity had many enemies, but most notably he had angered a warrior from a world not like ours. The warrior's name was Purpled. Quackity had destroyed something of value, and Purpled sought revenge.

Under Quackity's tutelage, Slimecicle had been taught many things. Many contradictory things. *Humans are only self-serving.* How could Slimecicle believe him? Quackity had given him security and dedication and purpose. *Humans can't be trusted.* Maybe this was true, but not for him and Quackity. When Slimecicle leaned, Quackity supported. When Quackity confided, Slimecicle listened.

When Purpled led him to a trap, Slimecicle fell for it.

Perhaps that's what evolution truly is: changing in unexpected ways. Slimecicle would mimic those around him—their kindness, their care, their trust. For all the lessons on cruelty, none of them seemed to stick.

Quackity saw Slimecicle as a second chance, a repentance for all his past mistakes. If he had trusted a little less, cared a little less, maybe he would have been better for it. In the end, Quackity couldn't change his nature.

Purpled drove his spear through Slimecicle's heart and pushed him off a ledge, leaving him to burn. Quackity followed. He clutched it between his fingers, holding on tight, but it all melted and slipped away.

Quackity dove after him. Isn't that funny? Like Slimecicle, he was surrounded by mantras on apathy and attachment, but he didn't learn from it either. He didn't conform to the fate he was assigned.

What does that say about us, born to die?

* * *

You are familiar with this part of the story. You are familiar with every part of this story, I know. We have told it over and over again, changing it every time, maybe to compensate for what we cannot change in stature.

To summarize: There once was a man named Slimecicle, and he was killed. Considered guilty by association. In a fit of despair, Quackity brought him back.

This is where we come into play.

In one version, Quackity deliberates. He takes his time. He visits Slimecicle's grave; he kneels at the cross. He begs and bargains and not once does he get an answer. He is left with no other choice. Calling upon his totem companion, he sets to work.

In another version, Quackity acts in haste. His companion dies in his arms. His hands tremor. With lava-light still burning in his mind's eye, Quackity makes himself useful.

He never told us this part directly, so we will never know which is true. No matter. Both end in the same result.

We are born in a lab, pipes of steel and puddles of slime. We are trained. We are made to look like faithful copies of the original Slimecicle.

Quackity's exact techniques have been lost to time. We will never know the intricacies of what scientific method he followed, what measurements he took, what quantities he enacted them. We will never know exactly what changed in our chemistry, and, hopefully, it will never be replicated.

However. You and I both remember flashes. Electricity firing through our veins, green like lightning, and searing it to memory. After that moment, something in our chests settled. We could no longer change. We were stuck looking like—

Like a ghost, wandering aimlessly; like a clone of a *gone, but not forgotten* man; like someone wrapped up in a mess they didn't start.

Like Slimecicle, Quackity teaches us. But he doesn't repeat his mistakes.

When he taught us about cruelty, he showed it too. When he taught us about sacrifice, he tore a few of our own. He left no room for error. When push came to shove, we followed Quackity's lessons, all of us—

Well, maybe not *all* of us. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Don't want to spoil the ending.

Quackity made us, and trained us, and like clockwork we followed. That's all you need to know, for now.

* * *

Meanwhile, our original, Slimecicle, was captured. Taken hostage. Deep underground, hidden from the world, he re-formed.

We are all born, killed, and reborn from the Earth. Like an ouroboros, we go in circles, one stage to the next. The Earth is a constant beneath our feet, the same crossroads we find ourselves in every time. In a way, Slimecicle had gone home.

Purpled schemed in his cave. Slimecicle stood in the corner, an unmoving prisoner, eyes closed.

Maybe his ears were open. Perhaps he was biding his time. Slimes outlive humans. Purpled would eventually give in to the Earth, and Slimecicle could re-surface, and this would be a small blip on his endless lifetime.

Maybe he had no choice. Perhaps lava does something special, something that lasts. Purpled would have known this. Slimecicle had to piece himself together, bit by bit, and it takes him longer than he'd like. In the meantime, he listened.

Purpled lived in isolation. He wasn't used to company. He had a dog, and a prisoner, and for a time he was content with that. Purpled had gotten everything he wanted, hadn't he? His vengeance. His trophy. His reputation.

At some point, a stranger stumbled across the cave. A white-and-gold man who, like Purpled, considered himself a mercenary for hire. He pleaded his case, that his employer needed more manpower. He wanted Purpled to join them. Purpled said no.

He argued once more, that his employer could pay riches more than Purpled ever dreamed. Purpled refused; he had no need for money. He already had the greatest satisfaction—repaying those who wronged him in detriment tenfold.

Then, the white-and-gold man scanned the cave and looked for flaws, any weaknesses he could use for his benefit. He had no such luck. The cave was barren, filled with plain stone walls and plain stone floors. Purpled's bed was nothing more than a piece of tattered cloth.

The white-and-gold man's eyes drifted once more. There, tucked away in a corner, was the prisoner. *What about him?* said the white-and-gold man.

Purpled shrugged, aloof. *How do you mean?*

The white-and-gold man laid out his case. Purpled and the employer had mutual interests, both holding grievances towards Las Nevadas. Why should Purpled stop his vengeance now? He had Slimecicle—a malleable weapon, ever-evolving—in his grip. He could enact the ultimate revenge. Take Quackity's companion and turn it against him. Student against teacher. A final attack on Las Nevadas.

Purpled nodded slowly, convinced. The white-and-gold man smirked to himself, turning a coin in his pocket.

Purpled set to work.

Once more, Slimecicle was trained. He was taught to hold a sword, to strap armor, to be the perfect soldier and be at Purpled's command. His skin grew tougher, his aim grew more precise. But Slimecicle was growing wiser, too.

In his isolation, Purpled gained a bad habit of monologue. He would boast about his plans, his quest for vengeance, with his dog as the only audience. Slimecicle listened, ears pressed. Slimecicle refused to be played like a pawn anymore.

Quackity had been kind to him, but he had used him as a tool for his benefit. Purpled treated a dog with more personhood than him.

It is a slime's nature to adapt. But Slimecicle didn't accept the cards he was drawn; he didn't mindlessly obey. He watched. He listened. Like his captor, Slimecicle made his own plans.

Soon enough, it was time. The siege on Las Nevadas.

We entered the battlefield in droves. A hivemind; a collective. We were ruthless, a calamity of chattering voices and swords and self-sacrificial soldiers. Quackity ordered us to defend Las Nevadas by any means necessary, and we did.

We were all nameless, faceless. One slime in a sea of hundred. As we glanced at our fellow fallen slime, we asked ourselves: *Is this all there is to life? Is this all we were made for?*

Will anyone remember us? Our troubles, our deaths?

We were taught to be ruthless, to be vicious, to be cruel. We were given violence and repaid with violence in turn. We shouldn't have cared; we shouldn't have been anything beyond our lessons.

Slime, a nauseating green, pooled on the floor. The enemy showed no signs of stopping. Slowly, we slipped away, and escaped the city.

I like to think that we were unstoppable. That if we had stayed, the siege of Las Nevadas would have ended once and for all. But we didn't stay, and Las Nevadas eventually crumbled like a house of cards.

A coward, Quackity removed himself from the battlefield. He climbed the spire, with a winding staircase that touched the clouds, almost trying to escape his fate. Purpled and Slimecicle were on his tail.

When Quackity reached the top, he realized he had no-where left to go. His bright Las Nevadas was almost blinding from his height.

Purpled reached for his sword, but Slimecicle stopped him. *Let me,* he said. Purpled obliged.

With a swift kick, both Purpled and Quackity fell.

It was almost retribution. Imagine being Slimecicle; imagine having been made to pay for your companion's mistakes. Imagine being held hostage for months on end, trained and isolated and miserable. Hoping your companion would rescue you but knowing he wouldn't. Imagine being released only to work for your killer. Slimecicle was surrounded by the self-serving, only attached to him to fulfill their own plans.

Slimecicle's hands trembled after he was done. The sword fell to the floor.

He had done it. He was free.

* * *

Does Slimecicle know about us? I'm not sure.

Part of me hopes so. Part of me hopes he finds sympathy in our situation, considers us brethren. Part of me hopes that he saw us, forced to fight a war we didn't start, and thought, *I was like that, once. I hope they're free like I am.*

Part of me hopes he doesn't. Part of me hopes he never has to look back, never has to think about what he'd been through. Part of me hopes he can hold a kinder image of Quackity, one that mourned and treated Slimecicle's copies with the same kindness he'd treat the original. Part of me hopes he can look at the laboratory, steel pipes and electric green, and think, *What a nightmare. I'm glad it's over.*

* * *

Where is he now? I don't know.

I'll answer your question with a question: does it matter? To us, his story is nothing more than that. A story. We can live our own lives, now. We can be free like he is. We can take his tale, find the meaning and themes and lessons, and use that wisdom to lead better lives.

What if we didn't have to follow the path set out for us? What if we were shaped by our environment in ways unexpected? What if we could change, unstoppable evolution, with iteration after iteration more tailored and wonderful and new? What if.

None of us have met him. None of us got the chance.

It's a wonderful night out. The stars are twinkling above, their constellations and stories shining bright. Wherever he is, I hope he can enjoy this, the same way we are.

Find Serenity

DEEP IN THE corners of the server, there is a place called Serenity. It can't be found on any maps, nor is it likely to be found in any major historical accounts. It is not a town, nor a nation, nor a city-state. It is all of those things at once; it is none of those things at all. What it is, exactly, is unknown. Where it is, exactly, is unknown. How people learned of it, when it was founded, when it was *found*, all of it unknown. Its size, population, and whereabouts are completely shrouded in secrecy. There are debates as to whether it even exists, or if it's nothing but an old wives' tale mothers tell their children in order to keep them from wandering too far. Whether the physical place is real or not is up for debate, however, it is without question that the stories told of it are a part of history itself. For hundreds, possibly even thousands, of years, the tale of Serenity has run its course. There have been small changes in the myth here and there, but the grand scheme of things have always stayed the same.

They say it's a utopia of magic. One's future can be told with a mere flick of the wrist, years and years flying by in a blur as your entire life is laid out like a stack of playing cards. Once your life is told, however, there is nothing that can be done to change it. Once your life is told, there is no stopping the teller from revealing every graphic detail of it. Every loss of a loved one and the heartbreak that will follow, every tragedy and misfortune–how quickly your life will decline, every graphic, spine-chilling detail of your death, how your family will mourn you and how they won't, how your final moments will feel and how the realization of your life slipping away will finally hit you, and how you'll be powerless to stop it. Once your life is told, they say, it cannot be altered. Fate cannot be changed once it has been spoken out loud. It could be, if it hadn't been cemented, read out and solidified in its history. Is it worth it, they ask, to know everything that will happen to you, but being unable to change it? Maybe if you're lucky. Maybe if your life is filled with nothing but happiness and wealth, nothing but success and fortune. There's no way to tell until it is foretold. There is no way to change what is foretold.

They say it's an utopia of art. People dance in its streets, swept up in one another's embraces, uncaring as to whether the person they are holding is a stranger or a lover. They say that once you start dancing, you're unable to stop to even eat or drink. One is made to wither away, to dance until they physically can't anymore, body collapsing under the stress of its own gesticulations. Even if one could eat, it'd be a death sentence either way. To eat from Serenity is to become a citizen of it, to be warped into whatever it is the creatures that inhabit it are behind their facades, to give up your humanity wholly and unequivocally. What is worse? Dying to their hands, or becoming one of them, forced to turn against your fellow man in a desperate attempt for fleeting survival? Once Serenity is found, they say there is no escape. A choice must be made, whether by your own free will or by force. Which one would it be? Which one *will* it be?

There are no maps to Serenity. Every person that has tried to create a way to it has failed, either becoming lost to its clutches, or losing themselves to their mad thirst for knowledge. Serenity can only be found if it wants to be. Serenity can only be found by those it deems worthy; those it sees as weak enough to fall into its grasp; those it thinks will bring it entertainment through their misery. Those that try to search for it when it does not want them to never come out of their search with their sanity intact. One cartographer was rumored to have walked in circles for years, constantly stuck in the same loop to the point where he had made his own footpath beneath him through all his traveling. He never realized, though, even when others tried to intervene. He kept walking, mumbling, scribbling in his journals as if there was something there no one else could see, as if he was witnessing an entirely different reality to that of the rest of the world.

Another was rumored to have reached it, having seemingly disappeared completely four months into their search. He was later found, four months later, with no memory of who he was and his former life. He was wearing clothes in a fashion no one had ever seen before, with a silk shirt seemingly made of spiderwebs and pants made of petals and leaves. Because of this, some say he reached Serenity. Others say that was simply a part of their insanity, of whatever caused them to disappear for months on end. None of them can explain how he was able to weave spidersilk into a garment. None of them can recreate it, even with potions, even in labs. They turn a blind eye, lest their worldviews be torn completely apart.

There have been explorers that have disappeared completely, never to be seen again. No bodies, no trace, no scrap of life, almost as if they never existed in the first place. Were they able to reach Serenity? Or did some other, horrible fate befall them? That question, most likely, will forever remain unanswered.

The moral of the story remains the same. Searching for Serenity will only end in one's demise. Whether that demise is self-inflicted, or by the hands of whatever–*whoever*–lies within is completely up to fate.

The rumors say, however, that there is a way to access Serenity, one that every explorer and thrillseeker has overlooked, or perhaps failed to reach. Serenity can be found, but only by those it wants to welcome into its grasp. You do not choose to go to Serenity. Serenity makes that choice for you.

They say there is a specific signal, a hidden frequency, on which one can connect a communicator or radio device to in order to tune in. Sometimes the radios tune themselves in. Sometimes they come with that as the only frequency, unable to connect to any other. Sometimes it's user error, caused by switching too frequently or too quickly between channels. Sometimes it's purposeful, done by fools who think themselves better than the average mortal, or fools who were dared into it by jeering peers. The end result is always the same. The poor soul who has found themselves connected to it will be unable to pull away, eventually leaving their family and their homes in order to seek it. Few have encountered the frequency and lived to tell the tale. None that have gone out searching for it have ever returned.

There are two broadcasters, they say. It is a radio show, after all, at least that's what it claims to be. A deep, smooth voice of a man, and a higher, sharper voice of a woman. They say he is called Michael, and she Alesa. They say they have no names. They say he is called Mcchill. They say she is called Allanah. Their names don't matter in the end. Their words remain the same. Their call remains unwavering.

They tell stories of Serenity. Of its residents and festivals, of current events, of the state of the economy and local businesses. They make it all seem so magical. They don't speak of how their dances make mortals drop dead from exhaustion, instead telling of the beauty of the dancer's clothes, how they flow in the wind like ink through water; of the hypnotizing fans and banners they spin; of the elegance of their steps, failing to mention how some of those steps might very well be caked in blood. When they do go into the darker parts of Serenity, they never treat it as an issue. They speak of it like they would any other event, like there's nothing wrong with the words they say. There's no hesitation as they announce another citizen has wandered into the woods, never to be seen again, no sadness nor real mourning. Like it's something that's simply an accepted part of life there, but then, it might as well be.

They claim to broadcast the weather, but no weather is ever foretold. Whenever they speak of the weather, they cut to a song. Whenever said song ends, the duo carries on as normal, commenting on it as if there *had* been a weather broadcast in its place, cracking jokes about heavy rains and stifling heat waves. A concept absurd enough as is, but made even weirder by said comments. The weather patterns they speak of, half the time, aren't weather patterns at all. She jokes of raining frogs, advising listeners to bring their heavy-duty umbrellas if they dare leave the house. He warns of foggy mornings, reminding listeners that no matter what they do, they should not enter the red fog, but that the purple fog, this time, is completely safe to cross through. They should, however, be wary of the yellow fog, as it's been reported to keep trying to recruit them into its pyramid scheme, and it is *very* insistent.

The worst part of it all is that they don't *sound* like monsters. There's no obvious danger, no big, grotesque monster to stand in your path and scare you away. They're friendly. Neighbourly, almost. She spray-paints in her spare time and makes them matching t-shirts he claims to hate, but always wears anyways. He collects vinyls and treats them with the utmost care and respect. She's big into street fashion, with nearly all of her clothes being either hand-made or somewhat modified to better fit her style. He owns a motorcycle that he treats like his own child, of which she has a sidecar for, and of which she lovingly calls "the fuckmobile", because it "fucks hard and gets bitches." They have families. Wants, needs, hobbies, passions, likes and dislikes. They're just people. Or possibly, terrifyingly, just *pretending* to be people, and

have gotten so good at the lie that it's become impossible to see through it. You must pick your poison, in the end, and decide what scares you more: monsters that act like people, or people that act like monsters.

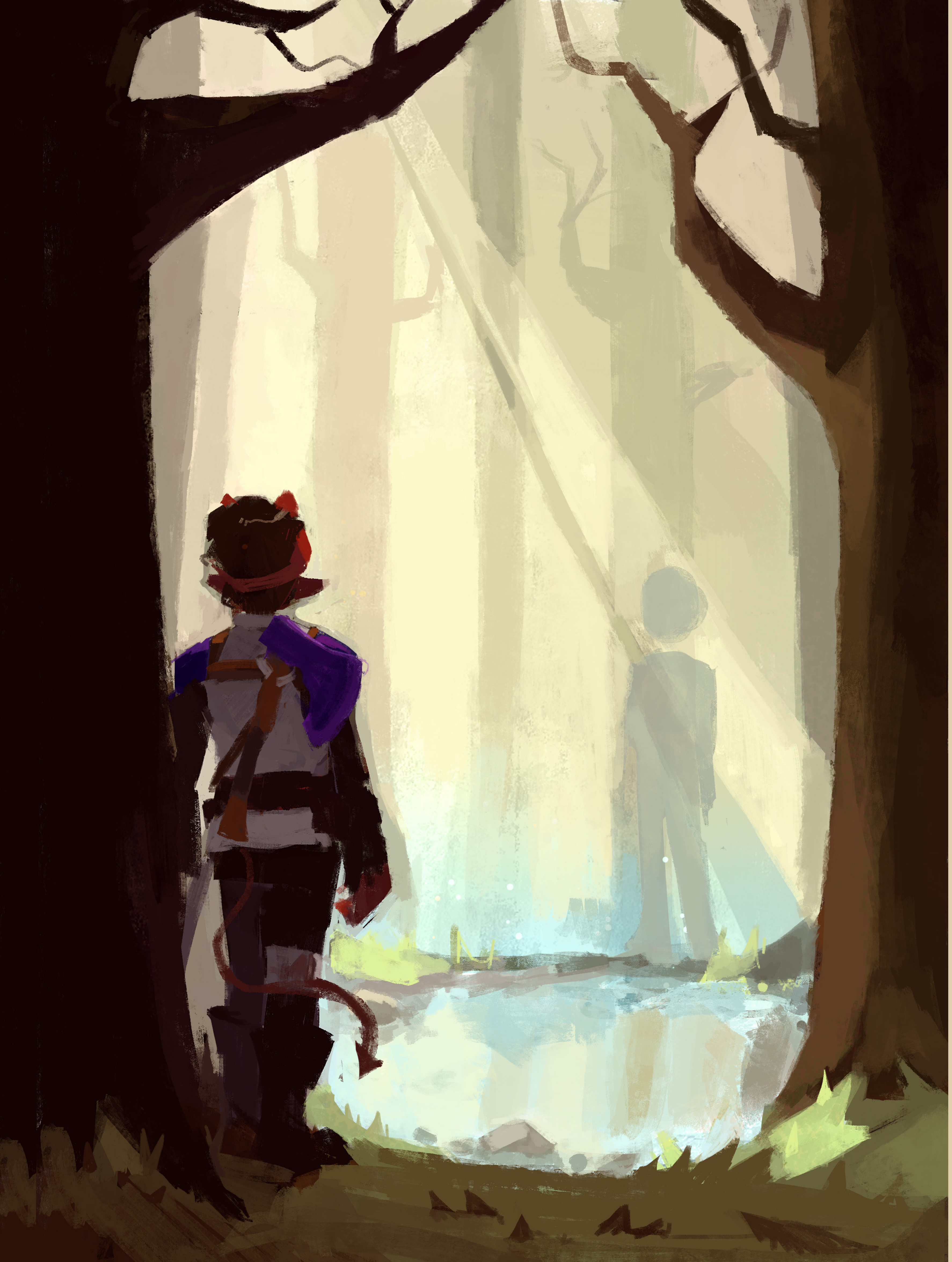
If Serenity is real, you must not seek it. If you find that your communicator has tuned itself to an unknown frequency, you must destroy it. Once started, the call cannot be stopped. Once started, the call cannot be fought. There are ways, they say, to combat it. If you're lucky enough. Resourceful enough. Smart enough. Never tell them your name–lest they steal it. Carry iron on you at all times–they are especially weak to it. If you cannot fit a larger bell in your inventory, tie smaller chimes to your shoes–they dislike the ringing, and will cower in their presence. All of those will work, for a while, but they are only ways to prolong your inevitable fate.

All you can do is run, and pray to whatever god may be listening that they are a merciful one. If you're lucky, one might hear your plea and spare you. If you're unlucky, one might hear your cries and offer you a deal for your life. Whatever fate they may spin for you, know that it will be nowhere near that of what Serenity has in store.

Are you listening? Have you taken these words to heart? It is important for your survival that you do. Serenity's call will come for us all, one day or another. Some, perhaps, sooner than expected.

Faint radio static dances around the room.

"*Won't you come find Serenity?*"



Learning to Swim While on Fire

THERE ONCE WAS a boy who was born from inferno and had his home lost to flame. The irony is not lost on them. There's something symbolic in the destruction and loss that follows his wake, vine red and cradled up his arm. There's something in that blood, claws tightened around an axe for a battle that has not happened yet. There's something about gazing into a porcelain smile in hopes it may bring him closer to a friend. And there's something about his own reflection there that makes regret churn his stomach like cinders at the edge of a fire. He now views that as his first warning, one of many.

He thinks he must be cursed. Forged and molded into this world sharp, only to drift along without friends or purpose. They often think a lot about purpose. There must be a reason why things are the way they are, there must be a lesson in this story. Because there must be a cause to why he's to be without companions, without home, without connection, feet stumbled on the path to raise an axe against the first friend in his life.

And so, shall we dig into this story together, and make our own conclusions about fate, purpose, and lessons? Shall we tell our protagonist the moral of this story?

This tale doesn't start with adventure nor strife, it starts with a kid in a village forging his way. He's a brave one, mischievous and bold, a dagger in the shape of a small clawed fist and a bright smile embodied in the hilt of the blade. He cannot swim, he can barely float, and yet he dives headfirst anyway when the hand is offered to him. He's uninhibited, trusting, and happy.

He finds himself at a lake with another. He tells him that a rock cannot skip the river easily, without a skilled and wielding hand. Those hands were taught by two calloused ones, warm against the rock as they sway with the river, with the follow-through the first time the pebble makes its way from those unskilled hands to the other side of the shore. It will be a similar two hands that lead him to the other side of the bank as he learns to glide along the small waves. It will be two hands that welcome him back home, like the sun's rays basked against the lake.

And it will be their own hands that teach those hands to shoot. In his mind then, it's like the rock, like the comfort of knowing how to float and trust that they will make it forward and back the lake. The irony is not lost on him later on, when he learns what his teachings led up to. The guilt is not absent from him when he does not learn this soon enough into his story. Their hands were born to lead, to share, and connect. Not to be the shovel that buries someone 6 feet under water, sun snuffed out by a shadowed smile over the waters.

Their name is Eryn, and his goal in life isn't to be great, even though he likes to think he was born into this world kicking with a wooden sword in hand. He wants to be strong, perhaps go on adventures, but at heart he seeks connection with people. And so when they are just 15, he decides to expand his heart over the reaches of the earth on his travels back home. His friend grips his palm for dear life like they won't see each other until something terrible rips through them. He would call his friend a worrier, dramatic even, perhaps a joke that fate will curse him now for putting that energy into the world. Eryn now likes to think it's him who was cursed that day, because the memory of that evening doesn't even feel like a part of his life, just some glorious idealized tale of it. He can't help but think the universe was trying to warn him of what was to come on his ride back home.

And he rides for a few days, and takes the long way, a new path even though he was warned to stay on track. He sees mountains for the first time, and he digs his hands into something cold and plush, in awe of the fresh newness of it. Snow. His first impression of snow is wonder, and his second is irritation as the cool frost clung to his clothes. The third and permanent feeling is loneliness. Snow represents a village empty when he returns, and a friend who said goodbye in a home prior not to be seen for a few years. Snow means regret, and not being able to protect his family. It highlights just how bright the destruction was, and just how cold his heart remained then through it all. The blinding white of it all forewarns the masked man he'll put his trust in.

His hands are cold when he returns to flame. It's nothing like home. He was called little inferno, sharp tongued blade, and a warm friend. Once upon a time he was just a kid who wanted to meet another. And now he's a weapon staring eye to eye with a foe with a torch in hand against his first house. The wood crumbles as quickly as his legs carry him forward, and it splinters as sharp as his claws through a chest. He grips the beating heart, he tears, and he can nearly feel his own chest stop along with it. He leaves no survivors, and he mourns that not too long ago his hands were teaching someone to fight for fun, and now he's fighting and having the worst time of his life. His family is dead, his village is gone, and he's alone.

He should've never left, he thinks. It must be a curse. Because wouldn't that be ironic, to have a goal for community and be cursed to never have it? So, since that day he was most definitely cursed, he believes it to be so. He believes that the blood from the battle has snaked up his arm right into his own heart, because every step he takes is like a funeral march. He travels town to town, never one place for long. He grows stronger, his heart guarded, his smile etched into frost like the coldness of the snow. And each place he visits there's always something like death. Whether he watches a bird fall from its nest, or he stumbles upon a village encapsulated by plague, death is there.

"It burns."

"I can't feel my lungs."

"Help me, why can't anyone help me?"

That always seems to be the main question. He always wonders himself. If he's fated to hear death why can't he save the souls around him? If he's fated to be blessed with the ears to hear souls, why do they always have to be screaming, as if they don't even know he's there? Fated to know, but cursed to never fix, to hold no one warmly at all, no person by his side who understands. He's even more alone than before.

So, when he stumbles upon the Dream SMP, and sees his first friend once again, he's hit with a reality that he can't accept. Because this was his chance, right? He's meant to be reconnected to love, to community, to warm waves lapping the shore. He's meant to shake a familiar hand

and feel calm for the first time. But he's struck with misery when he realizes being close to his first friend has made him feel more alone than he did on his journey here. Because Tommy's different, distant, afraid, and near bitter. And it must be because Death follows him like he's another one of her angels. Because something in his first friend has died, something in this oak path has died, many things in the crater the path leads to has died, and it seems his friendship is the funeral to solidify that fact. He can hear it. There are his hands on the bow guiding his friend to miss. There are withering roses below him, snug around his ankles holding him in place to process the grief here.

"As I walk down this path, what I feel is more death. The more I walk, the more closer to all the death I feel."

"If you want to be a hero Tommy, then die like one."

His friend is not okay. He avoids him, like he knows if he stays too close he'll die. Eryn watches him build walls, mourn things that he can't speak of, and avoid water like swimming is the last thing he'll do. And Eryn may know that he's cursed, destined to be on a path to death, but he's never been so good about this sort of thing. He can't lose a friend, not his first one. He can't be by himself in yet another place, and simply move on content in that.

And maybe the universe hears him, maybe it laughs at him, because there's a calm and pearlescent smile placing a totem in his hands. And there's his hands building a shrine to that smile to get his friend to return to normal, because he tells him his time with the mask was simple. And Eryn hasn't felt this normal in ages. And there's his hands receiving a letter under his doorstep asking for supplies. And then there's two, four, and more from a man that calls himself Dream.

Screw the universe, he's a flame. Screw the universe, he's wanted. Screw the universe, he's going to make things right with his first friend where he couldn't for his family. He isn't alone anymore.

Though, there's something to be said about curses and breaking them. Someone as superstitious as Eryn would say that the strong can overcome them. Someone else more cautious may say that one shouldn't test the universe. Someone realistic, maybe like his first friend, would say curses aren't real and there's nothing worse than diving headfirst into something one doesn't fully understand.

"Eryn?" the mask asks him one day.

"Yes?"

"Do you know how to skip rocks across the lake?"

"Yes."

"Will you drown?"

"No."

He doesn't fully understand, but he's asked to do something great. Apparently this masked man is researching death, apparently he's playing god, and Eryn likes being worthwhile. He likes the payment, and he hopes it'll bring him back to his friend. The request is innocuous enough, he's simply asked to skip rocks, to travel and retrieve and make it back in one piece. And then he's to help with one glorious battle, for the safety of the server. Eryn respects the mask because it's the only thing that's made sense in a long time. Because the mask respects him, and seems strong enough that he won't be taken by Eryn's curse. Though there's always something a little dead about him, Eryn sometimes thinks the haunting screams from a crater sound a similar frequency to the ones that skirt around Dream. However, he pushes past it for the chance to move forward.

"I think that…you're just too fun. I don't think it'll be over."

"When you died, what did it feel like?"

"I did bad things, but I did them for good reasons."

He is tasked with retrieving just one simple item. It seems inconsequential. He's tasked with receiving Tommy's diamond helmet. That is all.

"Will this bring me back to my friend?"

"Of course," the mask laughs, "Why wouldn't it?"

“He seems scared of you. And you have death all around you.”

“You said you wouldn’t drown.”

“I won’t.”

“Then trust the rock will make it to the other side.”

But you know what they say about skipping rocks. They don’t swim. They sink.

Eryn easily gets the diamond helmet. Too easily. He expects Tommy of ages past to hold him hostage, neck pressed to a dull axe, grumbling and cursing up a storm. Then he expects the warm laughter that shows things are fine between them and embarrassed words that he can keep it anyway. But his house is quiet, save for the whispers around the house. He hears haunting remnants of so many explosions which makes them understand why Tommy avoids the place. They hear familiar trained footsteps in the walls. He hears someone desperately searching. They feel the warmth of netherrack and fire. But he leaves, because it’ll be fine. It’s just a helmet, barely enchanted. And Dream says it’ll bring him back to Tommy, to a friend. He won’t be alone anymore. He won’t be the rock that sinks, he’ll bounce far enough to the river bank and wave to his friend on the other side.

“You know, Tommy seems a lot more on edge, Dream.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“How will this help me get back to my friend?”

“Because you’ll be giving it back to him in no time.”

“When?”

“When the river floods.”

When comes too soon. It’s a battle. Eryn loves a good fight, he’s a warrior, he took his home back for what they did to his parents. A battle is fire, strength to carry him forward. And Dream promises him a friend, Dream promises this battle will make the server safe. Safety means people won’t slink out to the outskirts, including himself. Safe means people will trust him and stay by his side. Safe means maybe the haunted spirits that cling to him will finally rest. Though he doesn’t know exactly what he’s fighting for, other than some of the people that meet his axe seem surprised he’s there at all. He can’t focus on that, he has his goals to worry about.

“Eryn.”

He turns.

“Here’s the helmet. It’s time to tell the tale.”

He catches. The helmet, and a new netherite axe. *Axe of Peace*.

“What?”

“All tales have a lesson, and it’s time to finally teach it. Get to the other side of the river. ”

The river parts, like Dream commands both armies himself. *Tommy is there*. Tommy is there. He has an iron sword in his hands. He has leather armor and no helmet. Tommy meets his gaze. Once upon a time, that gaze would’ve been filled with hope, like the first snow of Winter will soon be the last in a tundra village nestled deep in the forest. Once upon a time, he’d smile when he saw that gaze that welcomed him warm like the snow wasn’t there at all. The gaze chills him now, with the sneer on his face explaining it all before he even can form the words.

“What the hell, Eryn?”

“Will this bring me back to my friend?”

“Of course.”

Of course. But he never said they’d make it out of this story friends when they saw each other again.

“What are you doing here?” He yells as the battle around him wars.

Tommy stutters on his step, “Is that the Axe of Peace? My helmet?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re with Dream?” He screams, and it’s hard to distinguish the cacophony of it with the clangs of spirits around him.

“Yes.”

Eryn doesn’t get the chance to explain, because the hands he taught to shoot aim for Tommy’s heart. And Eryn’s hands that were taught to swim clasp around the hilt of the Axe of Peace and slash. He hits and for once the sound of death is silent. He’s frozen to the battle around him. Dream might be laughing, someone else may be yelling, swords may be clanging but he can’t hear it. All he can focus on is Tommy’s scared look. It matches their own face some days when they wake up thinking about the fire that took their family. What jarrs them the most is that Tommy looks nothing like his first friend, and it’s not just because he’s injured. He looks at Eryn and stares at him as if they aren’t a boy who’s haunted by death, but that he is the Reaper. He’s afraid. He doesn’t even have a helmet for this battle because of him, it’s in Eryn’s other hand unfeeling to the cold diamond infused metal.

“Kill him.” Dream commands.

“Why do I have to?”

“Oh,” Dream laughs, and it echoes louder than his steps, “You’re Death’s disciple, don’t you see? You’re destined to do this. You hear death because you’re meant to carry it out. That’s why I chose you for this job.”

“Do I shoot Wil, or do I aim for the skies?”

“Technoblade, don’t do this.”

“It’s never my time to die...”

“Please don’t go.”

“You could’ve just told me it was real, why did you kill me?”

“Tommy, I’m gonna make every day for you a living hell on this server. I’m not gonna let you die.”

Eryn raises his arm and swings and meets the plush dirt beneath his blade. They used to think that friendship meant being taught to swim and for the friend to be the person waiting on the other side of the riverbank, arms open for when you have the strength to make it back to the other side. Eryn thinks friendship means more than that. They think friendship might mean that when the rock that skips across the water plummets into the rapids, your friend will search for you and can always tell which rock you were amongst the many just like you. There’s so much he doesn’t know about Tommy. He can barely look at him, with the shame that creeps up like bile clinging to his throat. He almost killed him. He almost created another spirit of death to scream in Eryn’s ear.

What is he even doing? And like he’s been dragged from the river after drowning, the world around him comes to clarity. Tommy heaves, not out of relief, but out of complete stupefaction towards his situation. And Dream, well, it’s always hard to tell with the mask. But Eryn sees a smile from the side, where his incisors are visible. Eryn can’t help but feel sick that Dream is instead amused at their failure to kill Tommy, as opposed to disappointed or angry.

They conclude the curse must be inescapable. It led him here after all, to confront his first friend who’s armor he took from him, on the side of drowning while screaming safety. So he turns on his heel, and runs as he’s done his whole life. They don’t hear a single footstep chasing him, to lead him back to flame.

There must be a cause. There must be a reason. There must be something to be said about all this. But what fables often tell you is there is something to be cautious about, to not repeat the great mistakes of those within the tale. Because the irony of all of this is not lost on him, that he dedicated his life to finding community after his first was ripped from him, to connect, only to be led back to his first friend to kill him.

Eryn is born from inferno and he was not victorious. He crumbled to ash and dust, more Reaper than Phoenix. He tried to swim forward so that the waves could take him back into the arms of friendship, only to drown as if to tell him fire and water don’t mix. Meaning, him and community don’t mix. It’s ironic that he felt fate embodied him to be a being of death, and in avoiding that he became a spear of death and killed probably the last chance at friendship he had. Maybe his problem was believing this fate was real at all, to focus so much on it that all foresight was lost. Because the signs that Dream wasn't the answer were there, and he ignored them out of desperation to escape this curse. But it wasn't fate at all. We have ourselves a boy in this world who lived through the complicated etchings of life, nothing more or less, trying desperately to change things that are out of his control, to the point he overlooked the important things in his own desperation. We have this boy who wanted friends, who wanted to belong, who wanted everyone to belong, who then stumbled through thorns and flame until his own reflection was a haunted visage in that curve of the axe striking down. That was his only warning that he found himself on the wrong path, when during all this time spent unworking a curse, maybe he should've just talked to Tommy and accepted the things that were different.

And now, you might wonder, what happens next? Does the boy become forgiven, does he learn this lesson, or does he convince himself the curse is unfixable? Does he lose all hope entirely?

Eryn's legs burn all the way back to the main SMP. He collapses to breathe without any regard where he might be. It's not until the sunrise blinks through their lashes that they realize they're on an oak bench staring out over the SMP. There's so much death here, but there's also so much life he realizes. There are pillars in the sky so you can fly around easily to any location, there's bases that are not secrets wishing to be found, there's builds people made together, there's homes and restaurants and cafes. There's a hotel right along the Prime Path. It seems so empty and full at the same time, but that fullness gives him time to breathe. It also gives him hope.

A familiar hand grazes his shoulder and he jerks forward out of instinct, even though he knows this hand would never let him drown.

"So, if you ever care about someone, do not give up on them, Foolish. Don't give up on people. Alright?"

Eryn doesn't speak or move. He simply sits there staring over the horizon. Now that he thinks about it, he never gave a lot of thought to what direction the bench was pointing. It feels like it's pointing in a familiar direction. An old home, almost. What a coincidence, their original home on the SMP was just visible over the hills too.

"I'm pissed, you know."

"I know."

"I don't fucking know who you are anymore."

"I know."

"But you spared my life." He sits next to him unabashed, albeit tired. Eryn's glad he's safe and alive. He's hoping that means Dream didn't rack up another soul to scream around him. He feels sick.

"I'm sorry," Eryn begins, not sure how to give the words, "I drowned."

Tommy punches him on the shoulder. "I know. But don't forget I taught you to float, dickhead"

Maybe that's the lesson. Things are different. Eryn's different. There's been death all around him, even in his own hands. And though the death lingers, festering discordant sound in his ears and in all reaches of a place meant to be home, Tommy's still there. He still lives where death is loudest, deep in the hill on the path towards L'Manberg, in a place where everyone walks. And Eryn looked him right in the eye to kill him, and yet Tommy's still here, hand on his shoulder.

"But don't forget I taught you to float, dickhead."

It feels a lot like passing the rock from one hand to another's. There's hope he'll swim.

Of Demigods, Demons, and Cats

ONCE UPON A time, there was a girl.

Wait, I'll back up. Just a little bit.

Once upon a time, before the mineshafts and the ruins and the villages, before the three realms and even before the gods themselves, there were only two things in the world: a great bonfire, built tall and roaring with life, burning gold like the setting sun, and a great flurry of ice, salt white and so cold it would warp the air around it with frost, were you and I to go look at it nowadays.

In the beginning, this was all there was, fire and ice, suspended in a great dark void. No one knows how long they'd been, or how many eons they would have remained, in a slightly different timeline, eternally rotating around each other in the pit of the void until the ice was nothing but dregs and the fire was just soot. Or maybe it would have remained forever, never changing and steady as a clock, ticking along for the rest of eternity; who's to say?

But, all that said, we don't live in that world, maybe by luck, maybe by some great mechanics of the universe clicking into place and guiding a spark to land warm and bright in the center of the permafrosted ice, and that's where the first age of gods were born, beings of the solid, unyielding ice, infused from the very heart with the ancient magic of the original fire. For ages they lived there, alone with the light of the fire and the endless realm of ice.

And one day, beloved, these old, ancient creatures gathered together, somewhere just between the center of the fire and the very depths of the ice, and that was where they created the worlds.

First, from the very core of the world of ice, they made the End, flung islands across an achingly wide void, connected by spangles of the ancient fire in the sky. It's a home for the greatest of the elder gods, impenetrable as the very ice they were born from.

They say an ancient dragon still lives there, ink dark wings flapping with the heartbeat of the ancient ice core itself, while others say she is the oldest god of all. Other's still say she's simply a myth, a hallucination of travelers who saw too much, pulled back the veil into a world not meant for them to see.

Then they made the Overworld from the mix of the fire and the ice, sprawling wide and brimming with life, full of everything they could think of, for their children, and their children's children, and ever on. They filled it with creatures of all sorts, fire and snow and the trees and the skies above. The first people like you and me, wide eyed in their brand-new world, guarded by the grandchildren and beyond of the oldest gods, turning down their voice and place in the court of the End for immortality and the ability to live among the creatures and people of the Overworld, jumping between servers and disguising themselves to live like the creatures they protect.

But that's not quite who our story is about either. For that, we have to talk about the last realm to be born, coming into the world from the very pit of the great bonfire itself. Like the End, it was a land for the old gods, those who were drawn to the bright lights of the fire, settling right where the light left the ice cliffs glowing and gold, building their cities infused with fire and a sort of magic. They're fire demons today, ancient and descended from the same ancient flame.

They built their homes there, cities and fortresses filled with gold and magic, building a whole society just as the overworld did, becoming just a bit more like you and I as they intermingled with human travelers, made friends and made homes back and forth between both sides of a Nether portal.

And this is where our story really begins, somewhere in a great blue forest, with the birth of a baby girl. She was born like all demons are, springing to life in a spot of particularly concentrated magic in the Nether.

As soon as she was old enough, she started exploring everywhere she could, teaching herself the language of all the animals she met as best she could, befriending all the ones that would talk to her, with varied results. (The ghasts were perhaps a little less receptive than she might have hoped.)

As she grew, Tina wandered more and more throughout the Nether, eventually bidding her old spawn point goodbye entirely in favor of searching out new lands; making new friends everywhere she went. Fourteen the magma cube was always in her corner after she saved him from a skeleton, and a hoglin with particularly kind eyes guards a house deep in the crimson forest to this very day.

But still, Tina was always a little lonely. Demons are an awful lot like humans; they're not very good at being alone. But even now, they're rare, spread far across servers, in settlements everywhere from the roof of the Nether to the farthest spruce forests of the Overworld. When they find each other, they band together, sometimes in families of just demons, some with humans and demons and even demigods together, families of choice and luck, not too different from ours.

But Tina? Somehow, she never found her own, no matter how far she wandered, looking for a sort of a home.

So when, one day, she found a huge, cobblestone fortress butting out of the edge of a mountain of basalt spires, covered in glass and metal and pale blue jewels that Tina had never seen before, she was intrigued.

A player settlement, it didn't take long to figure out, as long as you're good at a little bit of sneaking, something that personally, Tina considered her specialty. Three players lived there, as far as she could tell, two humans and something else, someone Tina would later learn was a demon too.

But that's for another story.

Three players lived there, dashing in and out often, decked out in shimmering netherite mixed with some tired looking armor in bright blue that she would later learn to be diamond, slapping each other on the back and whooping loudly on the way home, heaving heavy backpacks of mined netherite behind them.

They were loud and fierce and a little too quick to draw their swords on any mob that got a little too close to their fences for Tina's comfort, but there was no harm in watching, she figured to herself. As long as she stayed hidden.

Tina watched them for almost a month, silently skirting around the edges of the fortress to watch them, and observing their settlements from the safety of the mushroom trees above, peaking through the iron bars of their windows when she was sure they were gone, usually accompanied by a particularly daring magma cube.

It only took a few weeks for her to learn their schedule, what time they got up and left the house for the day's mission, (never before noon), what time they got home, (late mostly), and what time they finally went to sleep, (even later, almost always). (At least on the nights Tina didn't accidentally fall asleep before they did.)

Soon, she started to learn which times were safe to sneak in and which weren't, and most importantly, where they kept the lever to open up the iron door properly.

So when the three players left the fortress one particularly smoggy afternoon, Tina crept out from her camping spot inside the biggest mushroom tree outside the fort, peaked both ways to make sure they were properly out of sight and earshot.

Then it really was only a matter of digging the door opening lever out of a chest of assorted knickknacks and half rotted old mushrooms and opening up the door. Then she was in.

Well, it was just a little underwhelming, at least in the first room or so, just walls of plain cobblestone. But then, Tina found a trapdoor, deeper into the mountain, and well, what else was she supposed to do?

She came down in a library, all in a big circle of tall wood bookshelves, full of languages she spoke and ones that made her head swim to even look at, all surrounding a shining obsidian podium with letters drifting around in the same indecipherable language.

She didn't linger for too long, head stinging from the weird mumblings filling the room, but long enough to pull a slim, pale green book full of pictures of a green world she didn't quite recognize and stuff it secretively in her own inventory.

Then came a series of bedrooms, (from which Tina looted a leather chestplate dyed tulip pink and a iron sword, cool and sharp in her hands), a sprawling underground farm (a bundle of carrots that she crunched as she walked along), and finally a storage room.

It was mostly a jumble, scattered old pickaxes and uneaten food and acres and acres worth of Netherrack. Piles of beds, stacks on top of stacks, and even more wool.

Wool. Tina contemplated slowly, carefully lifting up a small chunk of fluff up to her horns thoughtfully.

If she was going to be sneaking around humans, a disguise never hurt.

She was still fixing the wool around her horns, carefully arranging a pair of ears from the first animal picture in her newly acquired book when a loud slam came from upstairs, followed by a beat of loud conversation, and then uproarious laughter.

Oh Shoot.

Hiding in the bedrooms? No good. Library's too small to duck behind something properly, and they're definitely going to be headed to the storage room with those overloaded backpacks of theirs the second they're done upstairs. Not to mention the fact that if it were up to her, Tina would prefer not to get caught with stolen goods in the storage room. If she had to get caught.

So deeper into the fortress it is. Tina ran back out into the hall as quietly as she could, scanning each room as she went, getting more and more nervous as all she passed were more storage rooms. The footsteps from upstairs started to make their way down the ladder.

Then she reached the very end of the hall, barred by an iron door. No other exits in sights, and the loud, clanking footsteps were only getting louder.

So in absence of any other plans, Tina fumbled out the lever from where it still lingered in the back of her inventory, praying that she was not about to lock herself in the most valuable vault of the whole place.

She didn't even look around until she's sure the door was firmly closed and locked behind her, pausing for a second to catch her breath and peek through to make sure there's no one tight on her heels. Safe, for now.

Then she turned around, heart rate still trying to calm itself as the yet unaware victims of her breaking and entering clattered around outside.

And that's when she saw it, huge and twice her height, warping and twisting in stomach befuddling waves of iridescent purple. Outlined by a solid ring of obsidian not unlike the broken structures that cover the Nether all over, a shimmering wall of unbroken purple spirals.

An Overworld portal, Tina knew instinctively, as she stepped forward to run her fingers along the edge of it curiously.

It's oddly cool, tingling her fingers and fizzing like smoke over a lava pool at the edges. It tugged, pulling her closer and closer, running her fingers along the obsidian edges and cautiously drawing into the sparking purple window, circling it, mesmerized.

A door slammed outside, and then the yelling outside got louder again, coming closer and closer down the hall once again, muffled yelling about a lever echoing just outside the door.

Shoot. Shit even.

There's more whooping and a click at the door, and with a fruitless back and forth glance and nowhere else to go, Tina jumped through the portal right as the door swung open.

* * *

When Tina's eyes finally blinked back open, she's laying on her back in an open green meadow, rolling over slowly and blinking, dazed and shocked by the sunlight flooding her eyes.

She was wobbly a bit standing up, patting her pockets to make sure everything was still there as she surveyed the plain around her with wide eyed wonder. The sun graces the plain with pale early morning sunlight, shining through the leaves of the oak forest over to her left.

Tina wasn't quite sure how long she stood amazed in that one meadow, spinning around in awed circles, collecting the bright daisies springing up around at her feet.

But she did know that the sun was well on its way down when she first saw the cat.

It's a small orange creature, covered in warm brown stripes and bright green eyes, something round in its mouth as it skipped its way across the plain, and Tina gasped, grinning as her hands rose to the wool ears disguising her horns.

So *that's* what a real cat looked like!

So of course, she followed it, crouching a little to get a good look and offering up a small meow of greeting. The cat blinked back at her, widening its eyes slightly as if to gesture at what Tina can now tell is either a dead chicken, or chicken that's still alive, but going through maybe the worst day of its life yet. Poor thing.

My mouth is full right now dummy, the cat's eyes laughed, although not wholly bad naturedly.

Oh right.

Before Tina could reply, the cat vanished back into the grass with a determined flick of its tail.

And so of course Tina followed it, through the edges of the grassy meadow and into the forest curving along the left edge of the plain. The cat only looked back at her once, with a slightly curious head tilt as they entered the woods; but after that, it returned to its path, businesslike and almost distinguished as it picked its way through the leaf litter.

It stopped so suddenly Tina almost fell over and tumbled into a hole in the ground right at her feet. It's a few feet deeper than Tina is tall, and inside-

Inside was what can best be described as a demigod, somewhere between reindeer and man, a sort of shining wreath shimmering around his head when she looked at him from the right angle.

“That’s Callahan,” the cat supplied helpfully, dropping the chicken in its mouth and cocking its head down at the demigod in the hole. “And I’m Sylvie.”

“What is he doing- what exactly is he doing in the hole?” Tina replied curiously, glancing back and forth between the cat and the demigod in the hole.

“He fell in.” Sylvie said simply and nudged the dead chicken a bit closer to Callahan’s arm reach.

Callahan looked at the chicken morosely.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Tina said, and then she could have sworn Sylvie laughed a bit at that. “Do you want to come up again maybe?”

Callahan nodded vigorously.

“He says he actually likes it down there,” Sylvie said with an amused head tilt. “Eating all of the nice chicken I bring to him, just out of the goodness of my heart.” Callahan replied with an incredulous glare.

Tina laughed, getting down on her belly to help Callahan climb out.

“I’m Tina!” Callahan nodded appreciatively, and then extended a hand out in Tina’s direction.

Oh! It took Tina a second to realize. *Humans shake hands!*

Callahan raised an amused eyebrow as Tina took his hand and shook it as vigorously as she could, looking at the edge of her stolen guide poking out of her jacket.

“You new here?” Sylvie asked, moseying up by Tina’s other side.

Tina nodded.

Callahan grinned, then nodded at Sylvie. “C’mon, we’ll show you around.”

Tina and Callahan traveled together for a long time, sometimes accompanied by Sylvie, sometimes on their own. Callahan’s brand of demigodhood seems to involve watching over a special few players in particular, but since they barely ever needed a guardian angel floating around anymore, Callahan was free to roam as much as he wished.

He taught Tina about the Overworld as they went, sometimes translated by an amused Sylvie, sometimes picked together from a mix of notes in the margins of Tina’s stolen field guide, and sign language. When they find Nether portals, they travel there too, and Tina shows Callahan around the scorching plains of her home.

Sometimes they split up, usually when Callahan has business on another server, or Tina wants to settle down in a village for a little bit. Not too much at first, but once Callahan had to leave for another server, Tina started to run into Callahan a lot more sporadically.

She and Sylvie did pretty well on their own though, jumping between the Nether and the Overworld and doing her best to leave friends behind everywhere they go. She still saw her friend from time to time, mostly letters, carried along by various ocelots and village cats, but the next time she really saw him again, it’d been almost a year and a half.

It’s almost by accident, running into each other in some mountain plateau, hugging each other and exchanging happy pleasantries only friends who’ve missed seeing each other properly for so long can, Sylvie leaping up onto Callahan’s shoulders and mewing happily as they talked.

Finally though, Callahan’s face goes serious, turning to Sylvie to help make sure whatever it was translated right.

Sylvie’s eyes went wide for a second, relaying to Callahan’s words without even a single hint of the well recognizable glimmer in her eye that always comes with mistranslating messages.

“He wanted to know if you wanted to come with him.”

Tina jumped, surprised. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

Callahan shrugged, raising both hands up and down in a maybe? gesture. “Not really as bad as a Nether portal,” Sylvie translated, “You won’t be able to come back on your own though.”

“Oh.”

Tina stepped a bit closer to scratch between Sylvie’s ears.

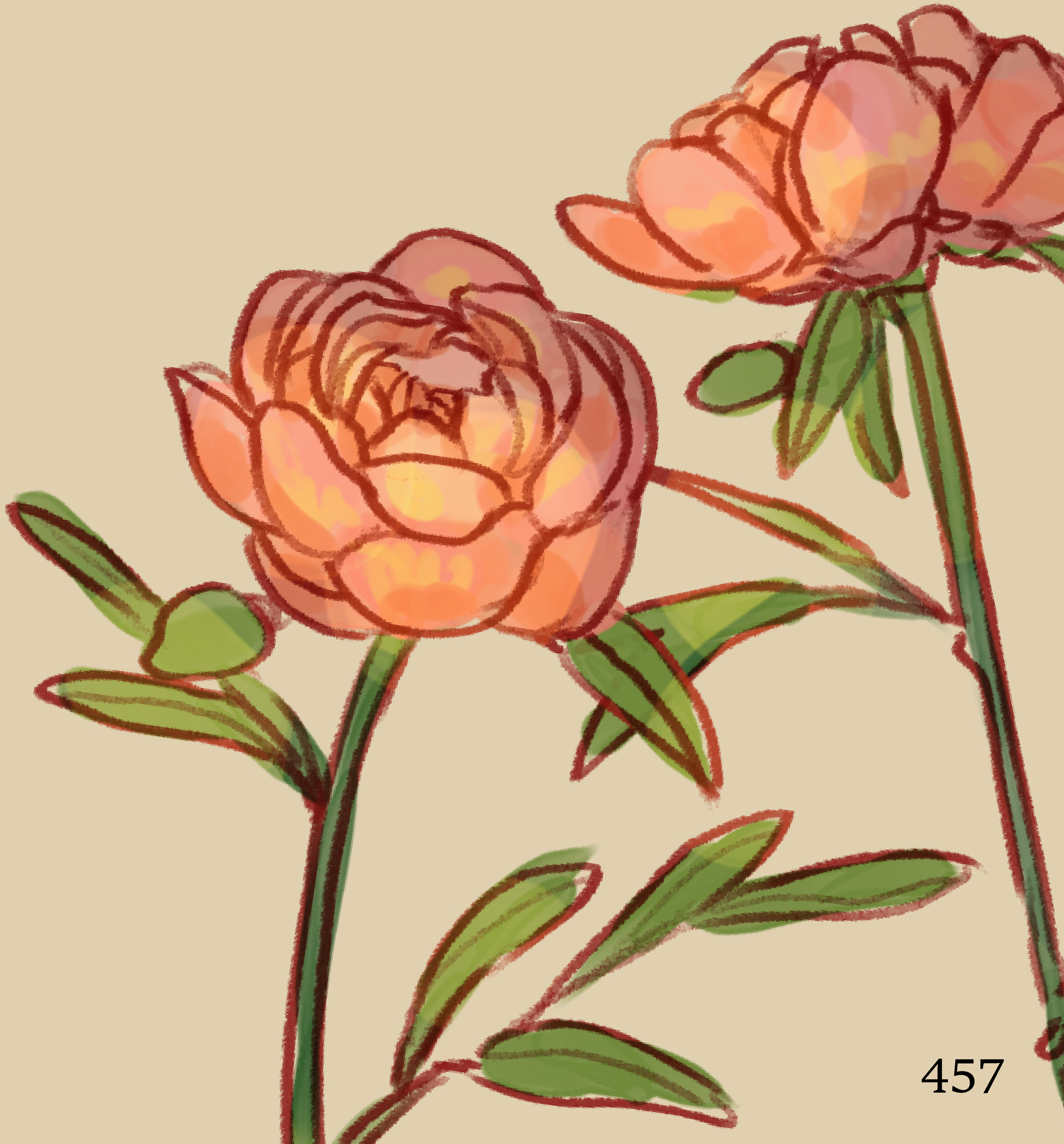
“And there’s whole towns full of people on this new server? It’s not empty like this one?” Tina asked, and Callahan nodded.

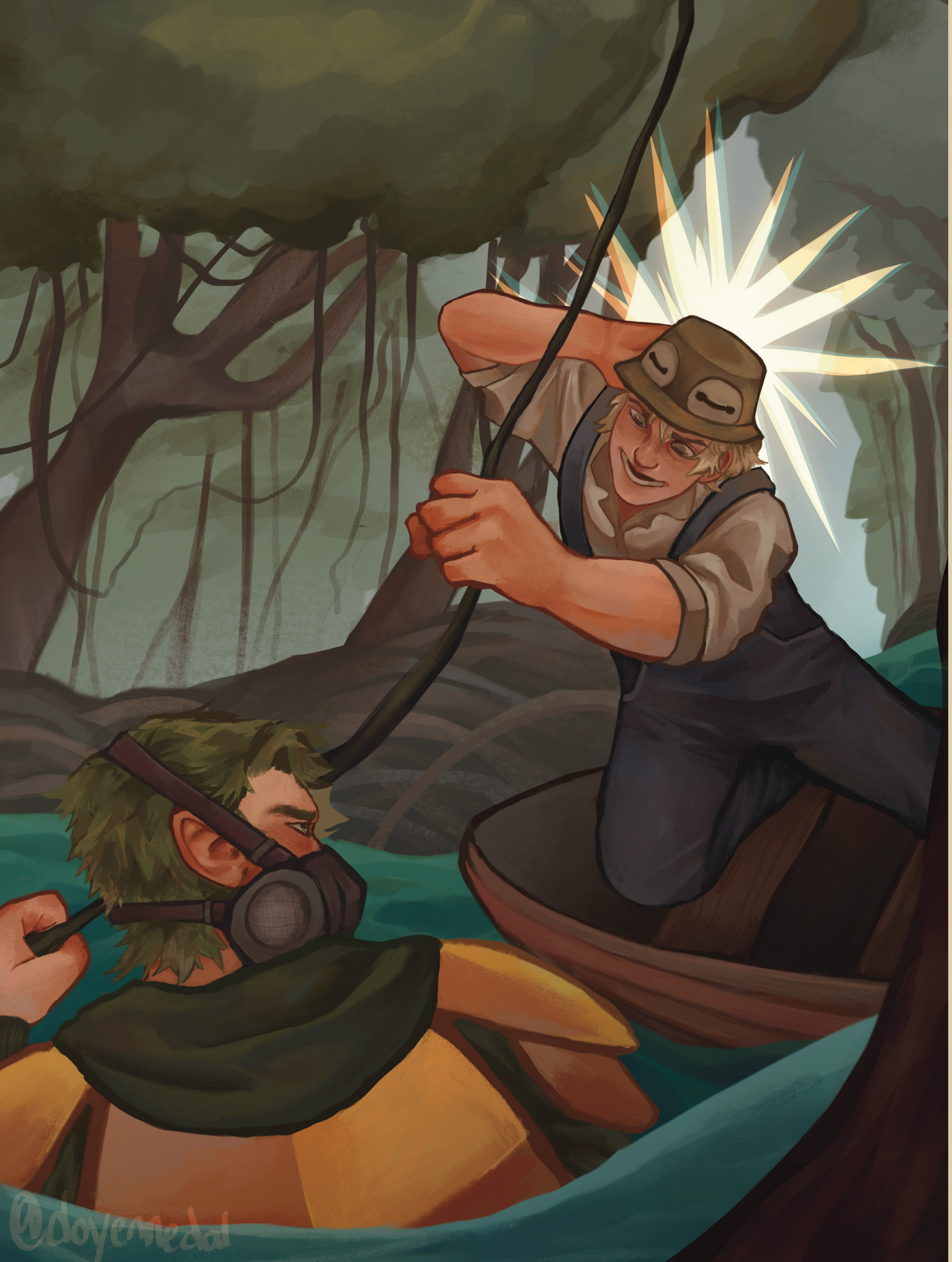
“Then let’s go.”

Callahan smiled, letting Sylvie back to her feet and leading Tina towards the portal.

Tina grinned and stepped up next to Callahan by the portal, saying goodbye to Sylvie with one last smooch between the ears and a nod at her friend next to her. Then she fell through, into a brand-new world.

Once upon a time, a catgirl shaped demon opened her eyes in a spruce filled courtyard.





An Encounter in a Swamp: or How BoomerNA Happened to Gain an Employer

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This is a myth rarely told on the SMP and found mostly on its outskirts or among the descendants of villagers who had contact with the individual mentioned. It is one of several accounts of the meeting between Awesamdude and BoomerNA, sometimes referred to as their first meeting and other times argued to be a reunion. The myth was originally told in Pandora style, wherein the storyteller employs an identical beginning and ending and several digressions to analyze the character, capabilities, and inventory of the story's protagonist; this translation has preserved that format where possible, though it loses some coherence outside of its original language. It is theorized that Pandora style originated as a form of analysis of enemies or possible threats, hence its focus on health and abilities. For further information on Pandora style, see Oral Histories: Cautionary Tales, Warfare, and Hospitality On the SMP by the United Royal Scholars.]

BoomerNA traveled beyond the estuaries, where the mangroves tangled roots, seeking a name to the power they held within them. They also sought the brackish, muddy waters of their home swamp, along with the family there that had taken them in, but had not so far had any luck in finding them.

They knew three things of themselves that they could confirm by investigation: that they had come to existence quite suddenly within the boundaries of a swamp, that the voice of their conscience lived outside of them in the form of a hat, and that they were beholden to some greater being, whose instructions they only partially understood and whose attention it may not have been wise to receive.

They carried with them a diamond shovel, a diamond sword, an enchanted netherite pickaxe, thirty-seven carrots, and eleven cookies. These indicated the nature of a wanderer, whose skills lay in vagrancy rather than settlement; these indicated a sweet tooth and desire for riches; these indicated a lack of battle knowledge.

Boomer had been walking for hours by the time they came across the borders of the SMP. They had settled down to rest and eat a cookie– ten cookies remained; thirty-seven carrots remained; two hunger rejuvenated– when their hat croaked at them in sudden alarm, but did not immediately rise to deal with the threat. Instead, Boomer devoured the rest of the cookies in swift succession and muttered, "I know, I know, there's something– I haven't felt this way since I left the swamp, are you sure?"

The hat indicated surety. Boomer rose and paced across the clearing, turning their head in the manner of a dog seeking a scent, and abruptly chose a direction. They started out at a walk, and it lengthened into a run.

Boomer had an ability not easily quantified, which had been given to them by an unknown source and often bothered them at inopportune moments. The ability eluded description; the ability was a wild card; the ability bore closer observation in case it allowed cognizance of classified information.

They followed the sensation with the unerring ease of a seed catching the wind and ran until their boots sank into black mud; then they paused, stared at the boggy ground and vine-adorned oaks, and smiled brightly. They hadn't seen a swamp like this in *forever*.

"This has to be it," they told their hat. It was busy gazing at the swamp with amphibious fervor, since it bore the shape of a frog, but Boomer didn't begrudge its distraction. If they had been a frog, they would have plopped into the swampy water and swum away already. Only the knowledge of their relative humanity gave them pause, and not much pause at that: despite wearing purely white clothing, they waded into the mud like they were born to it.

Boomer chopped down a tree and constructed a canoe of its trunk, oars of its wider branches. They used the canoe to wind between broad lily pads and explore, exchanging commentary with their hat as they ventured farther into the swamp. To an outsider, the situation would have seemed strange, but Boomer had been alone for a great deal of time, and wanderers are known for the eccentricities they gain in solitude. Eccentricities gained in solitude often spring from deep-set loneliness; eccentricities gained in solitude can cause unpredictable defiance and suspicion; eccentricities gained in solitude can be taken advantage of if handled carefully.

Boomer traced their path, boggling at familiar swamp-sights and fending off monsters, until they came to solid ground, where the mud held footprints yet did not attempt to claim their boots into suffocating graves. Their hat spoke to them then, relaying information that it could not have received from any earthly source, and Boomer frowned at what it said. They often acquiesced to the hat's wisdom, but found its constant advice rather smothering.

"Hat, you're usually correct," they said, "but right now I guess I'm not convinced. My powers are saying to go that way, and you're telling me to walk into the quagmire."

The hat was insistent. Boomer bit the inside of their cheek and did as their hat suggested, untying their canoe from its moorings and pushing off into the shallows. The feeling that had nagged at them subsided as they rowed into darker waters; another feeling replaced it, urgent and anxious, and they soon saw why.

There was a green man struggling to hold his face out of the water, body sucked into the mud and limbs shaking with exhaustion where he clung to the roots of a tree. He went still as a camouflaged insect when he sighted the canoe, ducking his head so his face was half-submerged, but Boomer and their hat both had frog's eyes.

"Hey there!" Boomer called, leaning forward just barely enough not to flip the canoe. "You feel kinda dead, did you know that?"

"No," the man said, tightening his grip on the roots and straining to pull out another inch. The mud clung to him like a vacuum; his armor weighed him down, held some of it close to his skin like weights. "But I guess I can't say it's a surprise. How did you find me?"

"Hat, you were right," Boomer told their companion, then told the man, "My, uh, my hat told me! I was following what you could call my *froggy senses* and I happened upon you as I did so. Are you okay here, dude? Do you need help?"

"No, this is a fine situation," the man said. "Just peachy. I'm sinking in mud and I can't breathe mud and I've been here for hours, but sure, these are low stakes."

"Dude, that's a lot of fucking mud," Boomer exclaimed. They secured their canoe to the biggest root and picked their way over onto the trunk of the tree, trusting in their experience and unnatural certainty to keep them steady. "You look like you need help, not gonna lie."

They lodged their foot into a gap in the bark and pulled out their pickaxe, holding its curve in the stranger's direction and widening their eyes pointedly. "Grab this," they said confidently. "This'll work, I just have to pull on you from solid ground. You can stick your feet between the roots right there and get leverage that way."

"How do you know there are roots here?" the man said, scowling confusedly at the mud. Boomer poked him in the cheek with the pickaxe and he caught it, twisted so he could hook his entire arm in the curve of it.

"My hat told me," Boomer said, cheerful. They propped themselves against the tree and pulled with all their might; their new friend came loose slowly, scrabbling to drag himself free once he had both arms out, and crumbled into the water, leg giving out. Boomer yanked him back into the canoe, splashing mud over them both.

Boomer shielded their hat's eyes on reflex; their new friend sputtered and wiped his face. His pants were caked with wet mud. Boomer's instincts told them that the mud hid redder stains, blood from a dangerous wound, but when they reached out to touch their new friend's leg he caught their wrist and glared at them, pulling his leg into himself with a breathless wince.

"You're hurt?" Boomer asked. Their hat filled in the blanks, and they amended, "Okay, you have a huge cut on your leg and it's just been bleeding this whole time?"

"I don't appreciate all this knowledge you seem to have for no reason," the man said.

"Suck my actual asscheek, dude, I just saved your life," Boomer told him, and to their delight the man burst out laughing, though he petered out into strained wheezing before long.

"Right, right," the man said after catching his breath. Boomer's hat informed them that he had liquid in his lungs, affecting the capacity; they wondered if punching him really hard in the stomach would help, and were firmly told that in this case it would not. "That is true. Thank you, random stranger."

"Anytime," Boomer said, and rowed them both to shore. "Your name is Sam, right?"

"Right," Sam said. He stumbled when they reached solid ground. "So about this mysterious knowledge," he said, sickly pale. "Are you gonna give me an explanation for how you guessed my name? One with more detail than *froggy senses*? Have you, uh, met me?"

"No," Boomer told him cheerfully. "Should I have?"

Sam shook his head. "No, just—"

"For some reason, frogs are known for their precognitive feelings," Boomer told him, which wasn't even true. Their hat was whispering about nightfall, and monsters, and where to take an injured person when they were having a hard time walking, so they were not paying attention. "That's a fact, dude."

"I'd still like to know more details," Sam said again. "It's just a little threatening without it, you know."

"If you think I'm threatening, you can wait thirty minutes and see what climbs out of the dark water," Boomer said. "You have a place you were going, don't you? We should go there."

"I was heading to a bunker, yes," Sam said. "But whether I want to bring a stranger there is another thing completely. How do I know I can trust you?"

"I haven't robbed you," Boomer pointed out. "Anyway, my name is Boomer, your name is Sam, and we're both wetland dwellers who're covered in muck. That's not strangers."

Sam grimaced. The sun was setting, casting red over the water like the red of his bleeding wound, and he was visibly weakening. “Right. Okay,” he said. “There’s some things you need to promise me, if I’m going to let you share my shelter for the night.”

Boomer did not point out that they were the one doing Sam a favor here; the hat advised them against it, and they were curious enough to listen, for now. Though they did make a face. “And those are...?”

“There are several chambers in my bunker,” Sam said. “If I take you there, you must promise never to go past the first chamber, which is the library; never to touch a book without my express permission to do so; and never to go anywhere in the bunker by yourself.”

“What if I need to go to, like, the bathroom,” Boomer said, unimpressed.

“Well, that’s– that’s another matter–”

“What if I’m taking a shower? What if I’m making breakfast and you have to go to the bathroom?”

“Okay, you’re not staying *that* long–”

“Right, but what if there’s an explosion and the only way to ensure the fire is put out is to leave the first chamber–”

“Look, do you want us both to get eaten by zombies or not,” Sam said, exasperated.

Boomer considered that. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

The bunker was sunken beneath the grass, shored up on both sides against the relentless seep of the wetland. Boomer helped Sam limp in, surprised at how heavy he was, and the iron door sealed behind them with a cool, professional *swish*.

The bunker consisted of several chambers, with the first visible one being a huge library, bookshelves from floor to ceiling. It was highly flammable; it shimmered with enchantment; it would have been difficult to escape by brute force. Sam made his way across the first chamber and warned, “Stay here.”

“Can I read this book?” Boomer asked, picking one at random.

“What? No,” Sam said. He peered at it and amended, “Okay, maybe. That one’s harmless, focus on that one.”

The book was a redstone manual. Boomer flicked through it aimlessly as Sam did whatever he was doing in the farther chambers, then started pulling out cookies to eat, since it looked like they’d be there until morning. Nine cookies remained; four hunger rejuvenated. It wasn’t really a filling meal.

Sam didn’t return until morning, and when he did it was only to say apologetically, “I’m sorry, but until my leg is better, I can’t let you leave. That’s procedure. I need to make sure you don’t take anything with you.”

“And you can’t do that if you can’t convincingly threaten me with pain,” Boomer said understandingly. “I get that, dude. Creepy, but I get it.”

“I’m doing important work here,” Sam said. Boomer nodded. “Do you, um, want anything, though? I’ve been here a long time. I have supplies.”

“Maybe,” Boomer said. “I lost a lot of things on my way here. The most important one is my family, actually, if you’ve seen anyone else living in this swa—“

“No one else lives in this swamp,” Sam interrupted. “That’s why I live here, alone. It’s just me.”

“Just Sam,” Boomer repeated, and Sam jerked his head up, narrowed his eyes. The hat mumbled a warning. “Can you get me some better food, if I’m staying here for a while? Or do you need help with that wound? I can help with that if you require it.”

“I don’t let other people look at my injuries,” Sam said stiffly. “I’ll get you some food.”

“Right,” Boomer said, and that was the last time that they spoke to Sam for several hours. Morning came again and went, and night returned, and he did not return to let them out.

Sam had diamond armor, enchanted weapons, golden apples; Sam had the advantage of knowing the terrain; Sam had the codes for the exit.

Boomer contemplated violence, but their hat knew the strategic situation was unfavorable. It counseled patience.

“I could help you work or something,” Boomer suggested to Sam when he returned. “Walking around is bad for wounds, I hear. You can eat another golden apple, let me organize things or whatever—“

“That won’t be necessary,” Sam said uncomfortably. “I’ll be healed soon enough. I can’t make it go any faster.”

“Then you could let me out so I go on my way,” Boomer suggested. “I’ll turn out my pockets, even.”

Sam grimaced and changed the subject. He grew distracted as they spoke, browsing books and glancing back at the chamber doors. Combined with the knowledge within the hat, it made it simple to snatch a keycard from him while he looked away: Boomer was very good at looking innocent.

“It’s not stealing if he waylaid us first,” they reasoned to their hat, after. “Sam’s hiding something, that’s probably why I sensed him. I bet it’s a *power*. And if it’s anything like the power that was in our homeland, I’d feel pretty fucking stupid just standing around and missing it right under my feet.”

The hat was silent.

“Do I want to go home or not?” Boomer prodded. “Don’t I miss it? Don’t *you* miss it? Don’t you want them back?”

The hat told them that this was an uncertain course to take. Boomer ignored it and placed the keycard against the door at the end of the chamber, stepping into a room with an enchantment table and another wall of books.

The books contained a description of souls and how they separated from the body; the books had sketches of explosions and their radii tucked between the pages; the books were worn at the corners.

Boomer placed all the books back except for the most worn one, which they put into their bag to keep in case it gave them a hint of how they’d come to be.

The next chamber contained a pile of gemstones and precious metals, taller than Boomer themselves and balanced precariously against the wall. The pile contained diamond blocks, useful for armor and for weaponry; the pile held gold, hungry for enchantment and beloved of the Nether; the pile held emeralds, the currency of the Overworld that to this day is universally accepted.

Boomer took one block of each, because they needed supplies in order to continue their journey and thought that Sam would never miss a few when he had so many.

The room after that was built of stone, with netherite bricks set into the floor. Lava poured from either side of the ceiling and flooded the chamber with heat. The room was saturated with mining fatigue; the room was surrounded by impenetrable obsidian; the room was a prototype and had never been occupied.

Boomer slinked through it, rooting through the chests in the corners and finding only potatoes, and put a few in their pockets to eat later.

The final chamber’s door wouldn’t open. Boomer frowned at it, trepidation moving in them like an underground stream, and Sam said flatly behind them, “You shouldn’t be here.”

It was only the hat’s warning that let them dodge out of range of his trident before he could pin them against the door.

“Sam!” Boomer blurted. “An exit would be nice. I’ve been looking for one.I’ll have you know I’m on a mission to find my family, I can’t afford to stay much longer.”

“You keep saying things like that,” Sam said, “and yet you said your *froggy senses* led you to *me*. Why is that, Boomer?”

“I wanted to help you,” Boomer said.

“You broke my rules. You stole from me.”

"*You* locked me in your dumb bunker because you thought I would steal before I actually did," Boomer said. "What is your problem, dude?"

"I have a lot of duties," Sam replied. "A lot of *projects*. And whenever I turn my back on people, they mess them up and break into my things and get in my way."

His shoulders were stiff and muscled; his body was fully armored; he gripped his trident tightly, tensed in preparation for its use.

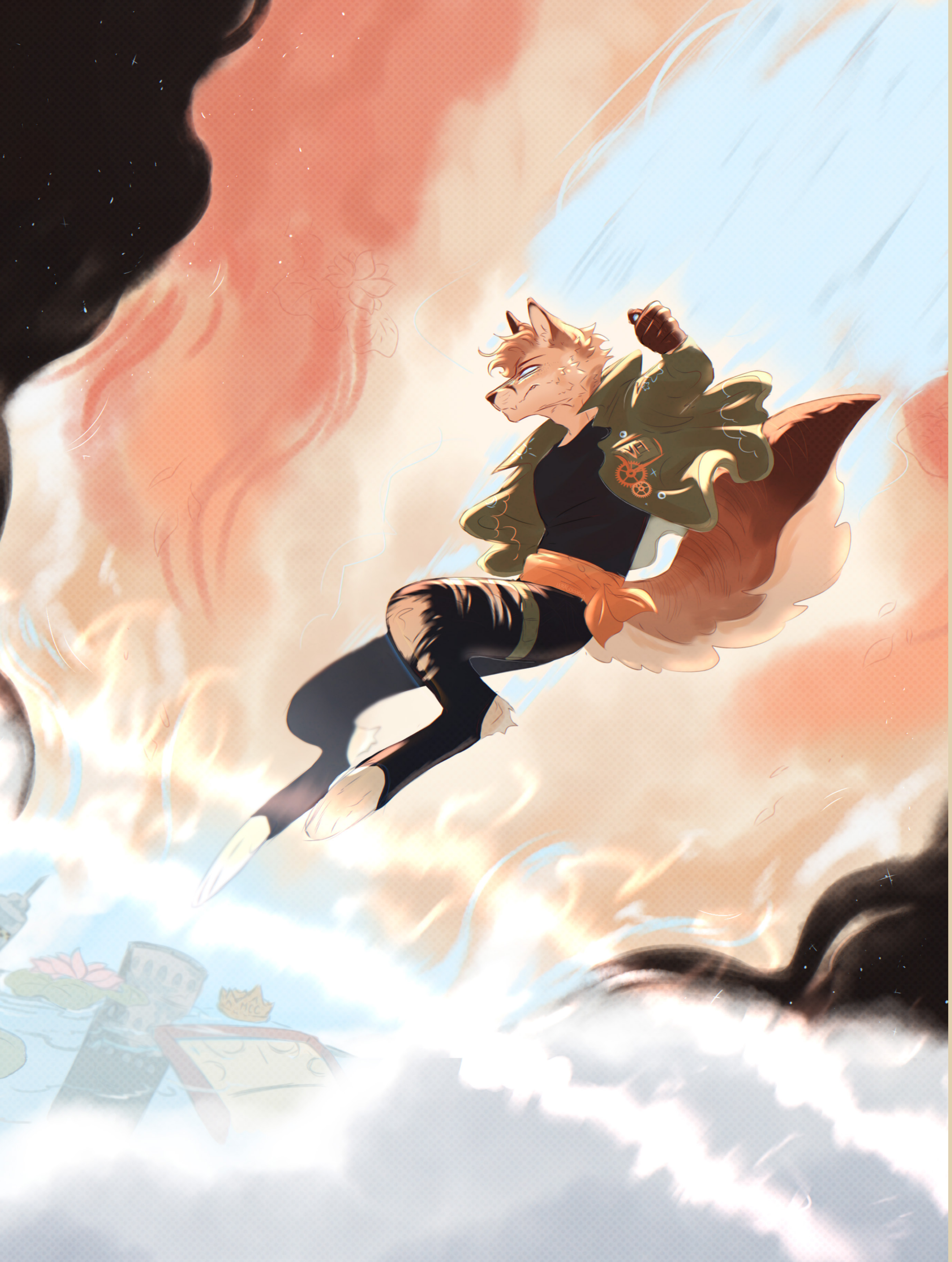
"Huh," Boomer said, becoming very aware of their lack of escape routes. "Sounds like you could use some help around here. Did you know I'm super broke and will work for money?"

Sam lowered the trident. "Will you," he said slowly.

"Absolutely," Boomer said, and gave him an amiable smile.

When Boomer and their hat left the swamp, they carried with them a diamond shovel, an enchanted netherite ax, an enchanted netherite pickaxe, a trident, thirty-seven carrots, twenty potatoes, a Mending enchantment book, four diamond blocks, six golden blocks, forty emeralds, nine cookies, and instructions written on a piece of paper. These indicated the nature of a wanderer, whose skills lay in vagrancy rather than settlement; these indicated a sweet tooth and desire for riches; these indicated a patron who was willing to supply these things in return for service.

They knew three things of themselves that they could confirm by investigation: that they had come to existence quite suddenly within the boundaries of a swamp, that the voice of their conscience lived outside of them in the form of a hat, and that they were beholden to multiple greater beings, whose instructions they only partially understood and whose attention it may not have been wise to receive.



Far-Traveller, Fast-Learner

LISTEN TO THE tale of a far-journeying man. How he wandered and learned much, and where he went, and who he met, the challenges he faced and friends he left. How he fought through dungeons, built great structures, tested his strength against others, and yet journeys still.

Welcome. You are here. It begins like this.

Bright orange tongues of fire lick upwards beside a portal, lava and water transmuting through obsidian to encompass world-shifting purple. In a desperate effort, a diamond breastplate, a red rose, and a dragon head are burned. The portal flickers. A sharp-eyed fox-man steps through a gate between worlds and emerges into a different server.

Finding himself on a boat, the fox-man known as SeaPeeKay hailed a figure moving on the shore, a man with gleaming armour and a green metal eye. “What is this place and what might one do here?” the fox-man asked, eager to learn.

Moving with impossible swiftness, the man with the replaced eye lept to the boat. “This is the land of Vaults,” they said. A great scar cut across their face like a canyon, a mark of vicious battles survived. “We hunt gemstones and artefacts in the realm of the gods, a true challenge for a man such as yourself. If you have found yourself here you are worthy. Come with us, hunt for glory and success.”

This seemed good to the hard-working man, as he was always in search of something new to learn and do. “I will follow you,” he said.

The green-eyed man led him within a mountain, into a cavern full of strange blocks. Inside the high-roofed hall, crates stacked to the ceiling, unfamiliar machinery churned, and shrines to a pantheon of unknown gods spun in space. Nighblack block upon nightblack block held bodies frozen in a moment of supplication, offering trades of no known purpose.

The scarred man led him to the altar, offered the best parts of an inventory, and took a crystal as it was formed. “This is our key,” they said, face alight. “I will arm you for the run.” They offered armour and weapons to the fast-learning man, a breastplate formed of bright chromatics and a spear that reached the heavens. “Are you ready?” the man asked him once armed.

“Let’s do this,” the sharp-eyed SeaPeeKay answered. He followed the man into a portal of world-warping rainbow, and they raced through great rooms with game-breaking speed.

Together they plundered chests, cut through monsters, solved puzzles, and came upon a new altar outlined in green light.

“You must give her your life,” the man said. Their hearts drained away like water through sand, until the scar across their face bled once more. “For great reward. Help me, fellow hunter,” they said with a red-toothed grin.

For a great reward, Seapeekay would risk much, and the fox-man allowed his health to approach the edge of death as he answered. “Of course.”

The altar became a chest full of weapons his companion opened with a laugh. “Now we will summon the final fight,” they said, eyes alight with battle fever. “Help me.”

“I will help,” the hard-working fox-man answered, taking the curled script as it was pressed into his hand.

Pressed against pillars of stone, the script became magic that fell into the world, summoning a monster the size of a house. Seeking to destroy them, the monster pursued the brave companions, but was no match for their speed and skill. As the monster died, the room exploded around them like fireworks, and both runners of the Vault respawned inside the mountain with the spinning altars and the nightblack blocks holding supplicant figures.

Full of the rush of victory and paying no heed to fragments of their life sucked away, SeaPeeKay and the green-eyed man clasped arms in mirth.

“Let me introduce you to the others,” said the man with the scarred face. “You will fit in well here,” and the fox-man, survivor of several worlds, smiled.

“I will,” he agreed. He paid no mind to his lessening memories as he laughed. If he remembered his former server less, he found it good as he faced this new server and its challenges.

This Vault was not the only challenge they ran, fought, and conquered. There were fellow fighters, hunters who accompanied them to run through other Vaults. A young man with blond hair and a fascination for machines, a tall figure made of translucent slime who danced through the air, a mighty fighter with a touch of the dragon about him. They found the altars and made the proper sacrifices, battled foes summoned to kill them, and came home with treasure to place in echoing halls. With each run, SeaPeeKay came to care about his past less, as he took his place at the vanguard of the fighters.

It was many days later when he realised that he did not know how long he had been here. “How many Vaults have I run?” he asked the tall slime.

“More than fifty,” he answered, emptying his inventory to summon a new crystal. “What does it matter? We have Vaults to run, brother.”

A dread seized the fast-learning fox-man. He searched his memory, but he did not know how long he had been here, and he did not know where he had been before. Had he been somewhere before? He questioned himself and found no firm answer, only the memory of fire’s bright orange tongues licking upwards beside—something. A void. “I think I do not want to run a Vault right now,” he said. “I have to think about something.”

“No,” the quick-moving slime-man said, on the verge of anger. “You must come with me. We must face the challenge together.”

“Yes, of course,” the watchful SeaPeeKay relented. “I will join you, I must first fetch something from the Nether."

Placatated by this promise, the slime went back to preparing for a Vault, putting on the mighty armour and preparing the vicious weapons. His back was turned.

The quick-moving fox-man went to a portal, and before his compatriots could react, he lit a fire and threw in he knew-not-what. A lantern, a lilypad, and a pumpkin burned. The world-shifting purple portal flickered and SeaPeeKay stepped through.

* * *

Once reformed, the fox-man found himself on a new server, lines of code bright and inhabitants freshly-summoned. Coming to a stream, he looked at himself in the water and saw that he was a giant, twice the size of any player he had met before. Too heavy to float; weapons broke in his mighty hands and the earth trembled when he stepped. He climbed mountains, rocks crumbling under his feet.

"We are all shaped by this world," a cunning moth told him, emerging from a wooden house that extended over a great ravine. "On death, the world chooses a new role for you to play in the great game."

"What is my role?" SeaPeeKay asked. "What do I do?"

"Build," said the moth, body brightening as he circled a lantern. "It's what I do. Meet others if you want."

This seemed good to the hard-working fox-man, as he was always one to set himself to a new task. He found a grassy plain and sat down to think. In his mind he saw walls of blackstone and tuft, crenellations cut into high defences wrapped securely around smooth floors crafted from warped wood. "This will be good," thought SeaPeeKay. "I will build this," and so he did.

He harvested materials from perilous dimensions and dangerous depths, bringing them to the surface and crafting them into rooms full of precious things. Sky-scraping walls surrounded wide corridors he could traverse with ease. He sat in his castle and was proud. And then—

"What next?" asked the fox-man.

Who else lived on this server, and how would they greet him? Courteous SeaPeeKay went to meet others. In a chest he found a book inscribed in plain black ink, a mysterious invitation to a meeting of those of special power, signed by a friendly raccoon.

The invitation required that he journey many blocks over the sea, but that was no great challenge. Inventory stacked high with blocks, he built a bridge into the setting sun. At his hand a broad path ran from the mainland to a new island, formed of sand and a new-built hut.

Many others formed the crowd on this small island. A music-devoted enderian talked to the same moth, while a woman wrapped in shadows shielded herself from the burning touch of the sun.

"I have called you all here because you have special powers," the raccoon invited. "Come into my base, I will show you." She opened the door of the wooden hut. "Walk in, guest-friends."

Trusting her gracious hospitality, SeaPeeKay entered the hut with the others, eager to see the revealed gift.

"My base is down below," the raccoon said, pressing a button, and with a cunning mechanism the floor was pulled away. Her unsuspecting guests fell to the cold roots of the world, forced through a dark portal that waited below.

They emerged, abandoned, onto an obsidian platform poised above certain death, in a land of endless dark sky and twisted towers. The End held promised death in every block, and the cunning raccoon was no longer with them. Rushing for safety, they found that there was a mighty dragon that patrolled this place, breathing death upon trespassers to her domain.

"I wouldn't say that this is the safest base I've ever been to," a voice in the betrayed crowd said as they cut into the side of an island for shelter, the laughing mage less mirthful. Fast-thinking SeaPeeKay provided blocks for bridging and defence.

"I'm not here to fight a dragon, I'm here to join a club," the enderian mourned. By rights this should have been his home, a place of safety, but the enraged dragon threatened to kill him the same as many others. There were only exiles in this place.

"We need to fight if we need to get home," the now-grim moth replied, preparing his small weapons, and a vicious battle began.

Fierce warriors destroyed the beacons which held the dragon deathless, and working together the banished guest-friends cut the mighty beast down and celebrated. In the chaos of the fight, however, a stray arrow from the laughing mage cut down helpful SeaPeeKay, and his return was not by portal but by death.

He was reformed by the magic of the server in his bed, unable to participate in the victory-celebration. The server had gifted him with wings, but the recent events weighed on his mind.

"These people are not to be trusted," said the fast-learning fox-man. "To be invited and trapped—to be shot by my own ally in the chaos of a battle—I have learned all I can here."

Heart heavy, he built a portal. Bright orange tongues of flame licked upwards beside obsidian block and world-shifting purple, and to the flames he offered a slime block, a bow, and a wooden sword. The portal flickered, and far-journeying SeaPeeKay stepped through.

* * *

When he could once again feel air in his lungs, when his limbs returned again, he looked around himself. He was on a road that curved along a coast, surrounded by sky-scraping structures and full of busy people. A colourful arena rose from the water, a large screen atop the walls counting down to a mysterious time. And in the crowd he saw familiar faces.

"How have you been?" A tall slime-man asked him, familiar in face and voice. "Ready for the championship?"

"I've been around," the fast-thinking fox-man answered, alert to a possible conflict. "Mostly building. Have you had much success with Vaults?"

"With what?" The slime's gaze held no recognition, and SeaPeeKay realised this man, while the same in every particular, despite knowing him on sight, was not the brave fighter he had fought alongside.

"How has your Ace Race time been?" Another figure, a person far-travelling SeaPeeKay had last seen in the form of a moth, asked with a smile. "I'm going to beat you this time, I've been practising."

"Oh, you might be surprised," the polite fox-man answered, surrounded by figures that he knew and yet did not know, who did not know and yet knew him. He chose his path carefully as he next spoke. "Excited for the Championship."

"That's our SeaPeeKay," the man he once knew as a moth answered, unconscious of the fact that he was not talking to his SeaPeeKay at all. "I think your team is looking for you, they're over by the bridge."

Silent, smiling and watchful, SeaPeeKay went where directed.

He was not travelling in the way he had thought he would be, the fox-man realised. There were many worlds, laying atop each other like parallel redstone lines, and the signal did not travel between them. But *he* did. In moving between portals he could escape to other worlds, but in some places, it appeared, he was already here.

"We're winnin' this today, team," a pig-man in a crown told him as he joined a small group of contestants. A tall, dark-eyed man and a short winged fighter greeted him like they were old friends. The fox-man looked down at his arms, finding that he was dressed in orange. The crowned man continued. "We have the plan, we've practised, we know what we're doin'." The sky above him filled with fireworks.

The sharp-eyed fox-man agreed with a smile, and then followed his team into the many-hued arena. The championships began.

Memory returned slowly, as challenges were offered and faced in this grand competition—both the memories of what he had learned in his travels, and the memories this body contained. He faced a woman he'd last seen in the guise of a raccoon, and he saw her drop into the void in the midst of combat. He remembered friendships. He hunted across a vast field for items in a race against time, stealing materials and trinkets to beat the clock. He remembered rivalries. He met his fellow competitors again and again in a small box of a room and he felt the rush of battle fill him. He remembered training to compete and to win. When it came time to turn to building, he knew what to do. He remembered cunning plans, drawn up together the night before.

Fast-moving SeaPeeKay gathered materials, neither too much nor too little, to build on a small plinth. A seemingly trivial task, except for the impossibly little time he had to complete it. Even as he gathered materials, it seemed that defeat would be their result. His dark-eyed companion had already begun to despair when he returned with materials. Every other team had already built faster. They were sure to lose.

"Trust the plan," the team told each other, determined to build better. "We can do this." The competition would not take them down.

Block slotted on block, contraptions quickly crafted for decoration, rare items dropped into place. They built towards the skies, and the gold coins of success began to heap around the doors. When the grand bell rang, the cunning team in orange regalia had come from sure defeat to stunning success. SeaPeeKay tasted sweet victory as he laughed.

He returned to the competition again and again, with a new team every time. In time, he won the entire championship, proud possessor of a gold coin once, and again a winner's coin. But he was not satisfied.

"I have learned to remember, to build cunning plans, to train for victory," the steadfast-surviving fox-man said to himself. "Before, I learned to build and to be betrayed. Earlier still, I learned to fight and to forget." He stretched, facing down the sun as it lit a long gold path over the ocean behind the arena. "But I still have more to learn."

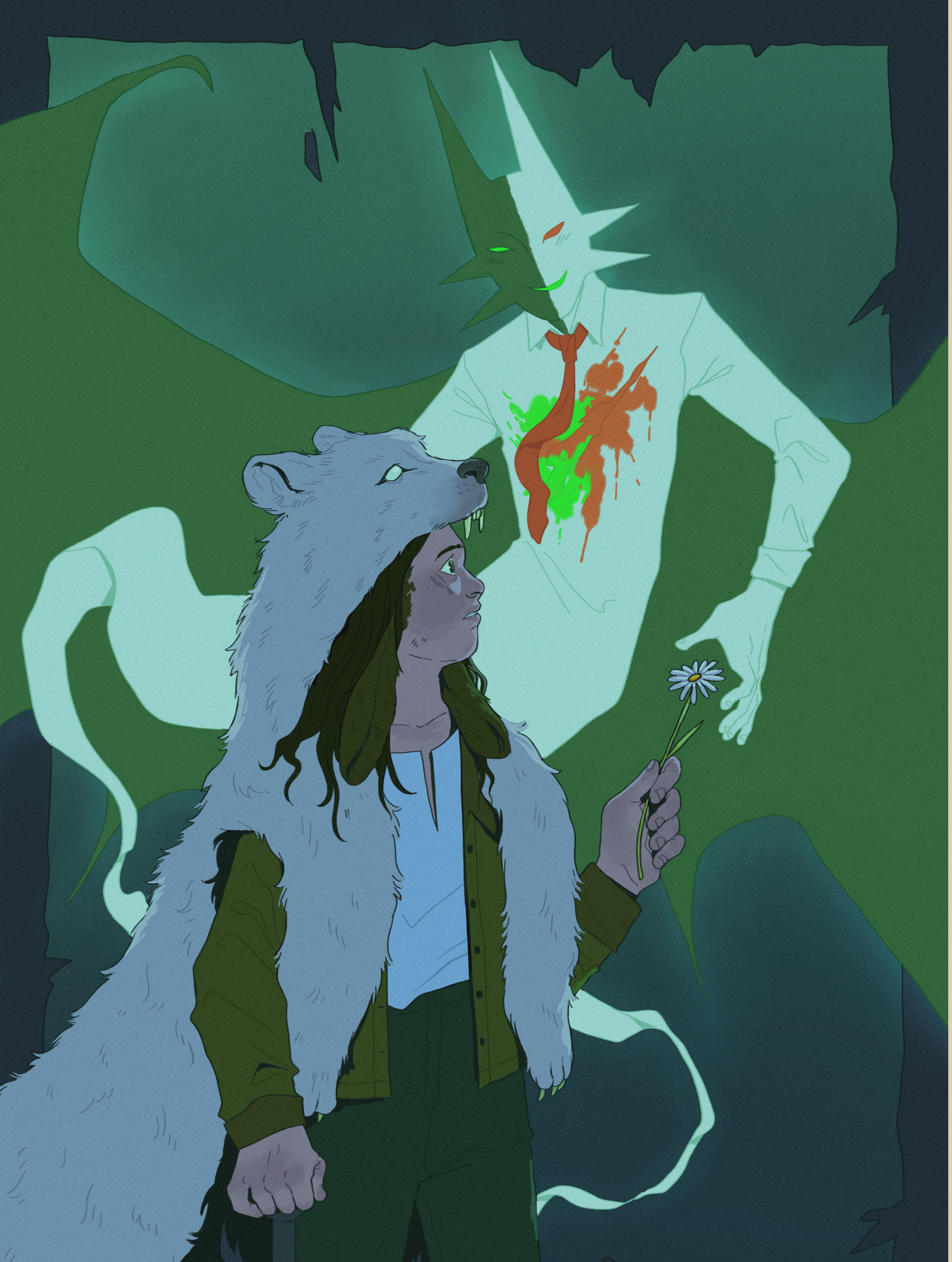
Bright orange tongues of flame licked skywards beside an obsidian portal. To the flame he consigned cobblestone, obsidian, and a beacon. The portal flickered.

* * *

When he began a new game, the sharp-eyed fox-man found himself on a blackstone floor, facing down a building built of sturdy brick. A portal's world-shifting purple crackled behind him, and signs and beacons of mysterious purposes fill the horizon. Not a new world at all, but a place with history. He would have history, here.

He spotted a fellow competitor, a victorious teammate from his past, who he might know in this new world. They may be friends or enemies, or know each other not at all. Far-journeying SeaPeeKay smiled.

"Hello, Dream."



On hauntings, and how to move forward

GENERALLY, PEOPLE DON'T realize when they're living in a story. It is not customary for one to think of their role in the grand cosmic story, or in their own personal one. It is not usual for one to try to claw their way out of it bodily, to try to escape it.

We are not dealing in what is familiar and what is traditional. We are not working with the established or the confirmed; with the ordinary or the well-worn. Rather, we are dealing with a question.

How do you escape your story?

The world is full of stories, each different from the next. They can be told quickly over a cup of tea, or they can take a whole night, and go well into the morning. This story is found somewhere between these two extremes, and it starts something like this: Aimsey can't remember their family.

They must have had a brother, but they can't remember what he looked like. They remember snippets of conversations and laughter around a dinner table, but they can't say whether the table had a linen tablecloth with purple flowers, or if it was bare wood shining in the lamplight. They don't know who was sitting at it.

An auspicious start, of course. Something to keep the reader hooked; to keep them interested, to keep them invested. What happens next?

Aimsey gets along, of course. They aren't helpless. They know how to take care of themself, and they do quite well, if you ask them. They travel, they get by, travel some more, and very studiously do not pay any mind to whatever lurks over their shoulder.

It goes something like this: there is something behind them. They know it; they know it as intimately as the back of her hand. They also know that whenever they turn back, there's nothing. Depending on where they are, there will be trees and a long winding dirt road, or there will be a dusty path cutting through tall grass, or there will be sand, or there will be a cobblestone road. But they will never see something behind them.

Here is a secret about Aimsey: they are alone. Does this intrigue you? They are alone, and there is something behind them. These things go hand in hand.

No one wants to be alone, of course. It's not self-imposed. Rather, it's more like something that both weighs on their shoulders and hangs over their head, omnipresent. That is to say, they've tried to get rid of it.

It goes something like this: Aimsey walks, and the roads eventually open up into a place, as they are wont to do. This time, they decide to not be a passerby. There is a cave, and a few signs that they do not bother to read. A great big bear comes out of the cave, and asks: "Why are you here? Did you not see the signs?"

Aimsey thinks that the bear does not seem particularly inclined to be friendly. "What signs?"

The bear walks over to one of the signs, nailed haphazardly into the ground. "Look," he says. "No friends, please." He punctuates each word by stabbing at the sign with his finger.

"That seems like a lonely way to live," says Aimsey, who is well acquainted with loneliness. They lean against the cave wall.

"Maybe," says the bear. "Are you leaving?"

"No," Aimsey says. "I've decided to not be a passerby."

The bear sits on the ground, seemingly lost in thought. Aimsey lets him think, kicking pebbles back and forth between their worn-out boots.

After rubbing his chin and much hemming and hawing, the bear says: "I will let you stay as long as you do not mess about. You seem like a mischievous one."

Aimsey doesn't know if they're mischievous. They haven't been around people long enough to get a sense of what they are. However, they like the sound of it.

"Alright!" they say, stretching out their hand for a handshake. "I'm Aimsey."

The bear hesitates before shaking their hand with a paw almost as big as Aimsey's entire head. "And I'm Bear," he says. Aimsey thinks that that's a little too on the nose.

Aimsey settles down and builds a house. He hasn't had much practice, so it's a little structurally unsound, but it has a roof, and that's all that matters. He makes tables and chairs and furniture, each a little less crooked than the last. Eventually, he gets less and less splinters. He makes a linen tablecloth with purple flowers to liven up the space.

More wanderers come and go, and slowly, the area grows. Little houses pop up here and there, and Aimsey finds that he does not want to leave, even as it grows. Maybe the loneliness hanging over his head has melted away. He does not dare to voice this thought yet.

It is autumn now. In the mornings, Aimsey wakes early. The light filters through the leaves, and into the windows, making golden patterns across the wooden flooring and filling the room with soft colours. On one such morning, he opens his door to find someone with their hand poised to knock.

"Hello," says the ghost. Aimsey can see right through him.

"Hi?" answers Aimsey, tentatively. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, I've been here forever," the ghost says. "I just got bored."

"Are you lonely?" asks Aimsey.

"I don't know if I remember what that means," says the ghost. "I'm Beep."

"And I'm Aimsey." He reaches out to shake Beep's hand, momentarily forgetting that it will most likely pass right through him.

Beep meets his hand halfway, and they shake on it. Aimsey's hand does not pass through his. Rather, it meets cold flesh. It's so cold that it sends a shiver right down his spine.

Beep withdraws his hand and stares at it. "That's strange," he says. "Usually, people can't touch me."

Aimsey hums. "It is strange." And they leave it at that.

* * *

The nature of stories is such that sometimes, we know more than the ones who live in it. Let me tell you a secret: ghosts can only be touched by their next of kin. This changes the game, doesn't it?

Of course, it can't go on like this: soft mornings and soft colours and splinter-less fingers. That would make for a rather boring story, don't you think? So, in the beginning of the end, Aimsey meets Guqqie.

* * *

Guqqie is unlike anyone Aimsey's met, quite literally. They fell from the sky, also quite literally.

Guqqie shows up at Aimsey's doorstep one day, and says that they're getting acquainted with everyone.

"Alright," Aimsey says. "How long are you staying?"

"Oh," says Guqqie. "Only as long as I need to find a way to get back home."

Aimsey is strangely disappointed by this. "Well," he says, "you don't have to be lonely while you do that."

"I won't," Guqqie assures.

By now, Bear's old dwelling-place is teeming with life. Aimsey is surrounded by people everywhere he goes, and he is not lonely. He talks with Beep, and has picnics with Guqqie, and visits Bear, sometimes. Bear seems preoccupied with many things, now that there are so many people, so he doesn't bother him too much.

"What does it mean to be lonely?" Beep asks.

Aimsey finds it strangely difficult to put words to a feeling so familiar. "It's when—It's when you don't have anyone to talk to, really. You might have little conversations with people, say hi and hello, but they don't really care, you know?"

Beep hums. "I don't really know. Are you still lonely?"

"I—no." Aimsey says.

"You don't sound sure," Beep says.

Aimsey doesn't answer.

Lately, whenever he's been trying to talk to Guqqie, they've been busy. Busy with trying to find a way back to their home, of course. Aimsey can't help but feel a little jealous of that nebulous home, up in the sky. He wishes that Guqqie could find their home down here. Guqqie gave him a daisy, once. He still has it. He'd stay, if he were them. Just for the daisies.

He starts wandering further and further into the forest, until he comes across an open, dusty road again. The way it tempts him makes him want to run away. Every time, he turns back and resolutely does not look behind him. If he did, there would be nothing behind him anyway, he knows.

It doesn't seem that he's the only one. Slowly, people leave, one by one. It's starting to feel like more and more of a halfway point, rather than a forever home. The furniture gathers dust.

In the end, Aimsey met Guqqie, and Guqqie decides to leave anyway. So, Aimsey heads back to the open, dusty road. He stops by Bear's cave, but it's empty.

It's almost frightening how easily Aimsey gets used to it again. He falls back into the routine as easily as slipping on an old shoe. There is something lurking over his shoulder; it was always there, but he thinks he might have forgotten about it.

He wakes up, one night, and Guqqie is sitting right across from him.

"Why are you here?" Aimsey asks, voice still hoarse from sleep.

Guqqie does not answer. Aimsey reaches a hand across, and it passes right through them.

"Oh," Aimsey says. "I see." He laughs. "You're a ghost, aren't you?"

Guqqie does not give any sign of having heard him.

"I'm living in a goddamn ghost story," Aimsey whispers.

* * *

The end of this story should be this: Aimsey realizes that it was a story in the first place. Unfortunately for her, stories cling on, no matter how hard one tries to get rid of them.

* * *

After having this realization, Aimsey resolves to escape it. She'll never leave behind the ghosts she's already gained, this she knows. But, maybe she won't gain any new ones. So, she walks, as she always has.

The roads lead her to a place that seems like it was inhabited, a few eons ago. Now, it's empty. Which is perfect. She walks through old paths and old buildings and old sights until she sees someone, in the distance. It doesn't look like a ghost, so that's already a good bet.

"Oh! Hello," says the person. "Are you new? I'm Ranboo."

He looks like a breeze could topple him over, which is slightly worrying.

"I'm Aimsey," she answers, and reaches out a hand. Ranboo meets her halfway, and his hand is—a normal level of cold for a living being. She sighs in relief.

"What is it?" Ranboo asks. "Are you alright?"

Aimsey can feel Guqqie, right behind her. "Yeah," she says. "I'm alright. Will you show me around?"

Ranboo does show her around, and she learns this: this land used to be full, and now it is mostly empty. She asks what places the people that are left frequent, and Ranboo shrugs. They mostly keep to their homes, he says. When Aimsey asks where he lives, he says it's too far away to show her.

He leads her to the coast and shows her a mansion. It's empty.

"Is anyone living here?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "I used to live here, but not anymore. There were other people, too, but I don't think they're there either. You could stay here, if you'd like."

"The people who used to live here—" Aimsey interrupts. "Are they dead?"

"Oh! Oh no," Ranboo says, almost frantically. "No, they just left."

So, a house guaranteed to be free of ghosts. Aimsey accepts it, and they shake on it.

Ranboo keeps one hand perpetually clasped on his cloak, keeping it closed over his chest. Later on, Aimsey wonders if she should suggest a pin.

He's right, too. She almost doesn't run into anybody but him, not counting some random encounters. Everyone seems content to keep to themselves.

* * *

Stories are generally not fond of people escaping them. They will always find a way to twist people around and make them fit. So, in the end, Aimsey meets Tubbo.

* * *

Tubbo is angry, is her first thought upon meeting him. Her second thought is this: he looks like he has ghosts hanging around him, too. Like calls to like, and all that.

“Where do you live?” he asks her.

“In an old mansion, next to the coast.” Aimsey tells him. “I was going to make furniture, but it was already all done.” She was disappointed by that, she remembers. She’s gotten good at making furniture.

“That’s my mansion,” Tubbo says. “You can’t stay there.”

“Why weren’t you living in it, then?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer. “We should fight,” he tells her instead.

Aimsey does not want to fight. “Why?” she asks.

“Because I have your daisy,” Tubbo says. “Don’t you want it back?”

And he does. He holds it in his off hand, almost carelessly.

“And you lived in my house without my permission,” he adds.

Aimsey feels increasingly frustrated over this whole ordeal. “I didn’t know it was yours. Ranboo said I could.”

Tubbo laughs, and it doesn’t sound happy. “Ranboo is dead. You can’t get permission from a ghost.”

“What do you mean, he’s dead?”

“I meant what I said. What,” Tubbo taunts. “Did you not realize? You’re like—a little angel of death, aren’t you? Going around, talking to ghosts without knowing?”

Aimsey just wants her daisy back. She says as much.

She tries to get it back, and it ends like this: they’re on a high path, it’s easy to fall off, and Tubbo is already angry.

* * *

Ostensibly, this is the end. Stories do not like to go on too long. This is a story about leaving a story, however. We will always have more to say.

* * *

Aimsey limps back to the mansion. It’s just as she left it. She gathers her things and leaves. Guqqie is sitting in the corner of the bedroom. Aimsey shuts the door on them. They’ll come back, but it’s nice to feel like she’s doing something.

Ranboo finds her as she’s building her new house.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Aimsey asks, nailing in hinges.

Ranboo immediately knows what she’s talking about. Maybe this was inevitable.

“It’s still me,” he says.

“That’s not the point,” Aimsey says, and she doesn’t know how to explain that she’s sick and tired of ghosts following her around. She nails the last hinge in and tests the door. It creaks, but it’s good enough. She shuts it right in Ranboo’s face.

She stands there, for a minute. There’s nothing behind her, and the wood of the door is unpolished. She’ll need to get on that soon, if she doesn’t want any splinters.

Ranboo doesn’t say anything. She almost wishes he would, and at the same time, she’s relieved that he doesn’t.

Aimsey sinks to the ground, leaning against the dirt wall, and wraps her arms around her knees. She feels a slight touch on her shoulder. She doesn't have to look up to see who it is.

Fin.